

How He Came to Be SOMEWHERE

JONATHAN FRANZEN

An Interview
— *and* —
Three Early Stories

THE PARIS REVIEW
New York • 2010

Fuck "Copyright"

Read Free or Die

Contents

How He Came to Be Somewhere

Introduction by Stephen J. Burn

An Interview with Jonathan Franzen

Three Early Stories

1. Breakup Stories

2. Two's Company

3. How He Came to Be Nowhere

ABOUT JONATHAN FRANZEN

JONATHAN FRANZEN WAS BORN IN 1959 in Chicago and grew up in St Louis, where his father was a civil engineer. He majored in German at Swarthmore College and from 1983 to 1987 worked part-time as an earthquake analyst for the Department of Earth and Planetary Sciences at Harvard University. After his first novel, *The Twenty-Seventh City*, was published in 1988, he received a Whiting Writers Award. His second novel, *Strong Motion*, appeared in 1992. He is a Guggenheim Fellow and a frequent contributor to the *New Yorker*. He lives in New York City and Santa Cruz, California.

**HOW HE
CAME TO BE
SOMEWHERE**



The Franzens: Bob, Irene, Jonathan, Tom.
Webster Groves, MO

INTRODUCTION

by Stephen J. Burn

Jonathan Franzen's fiction bears the mark of a Midwest upbringing, his books preoccupied with quiet lives nurtured there and broken apart by contact with the rest of the world. But four long novels into an unusually public career, Franzen now moves about the country quite a bit, living most of the year in New York, where he writes in an office overlooking busy 125th Street, and some of it in a leafy community on the outskirts of Santa Cruz, where I met him just a few days before his most recent novel, *Freedom*, was released.

The scale of *Freedom*'s rapturous reception isn't yet evident on the morning of our first conversation, though the book has already been called "the novel of the century," and its author has just become the first writer in a decade to appear on the cover of *Time* magazine; a visit to the White House is soon to come. At the same time, two popular female novelists have been arguing, via Twitter, that Franzen owes his stature to the prejudices and gender asymmetries of book reviewing, and there are hints, too, that a broader backlash is brewing. (In London a few weeks later, he'll have his glasses stolen by pranksters at a book party.) As we drive through the morning fog, Franzen recounts both sides to me as if he has no vested interest in either position—his stance is that of a detached, and slightly amused, observer.

Jonathan Franzen was born in 1959, in Western Springs, Illinois, and raised in Webster Groves, a suburb of St. Louis. The youngest of three children, Franzen grew up in a home dominated by pragmatic parents—his father an engineer, his mother a homemaker—who saw little value in the arts and who encouraged him to occupy himself instead with more practical subjects. A fascination with the sciences hangs over much of Franzen's early writing, composed before his arrival at Swarthmore College. One unpublished story describes a visit from Pythagoras. An early play about Isaac Newton was championed by a physics teacher at Webster Groves High School.

Franzen describes his first book, *The Twenty-Seventh City* (1988), as a sci-fi novel that is all *fi* and no *sci*—a concept-driven omnibus fiction in which a group of influential and politically ambitious Indians, led by the former police commissioner of Bombay, infiltrate

the bureaucracy of an unspectacular Midwestern town and terrorize its residents. *The Twenty-Seventh City* is set in his native St. Louis, but Franzen wrote the majority of the novel while employed as a research assistant at Harvard University's Department of Earth and Planetary Sciences, where he worked crunching data on seismic activity. This experience would enrich his second novel, *Strong Motion* (1992), an intimate depiction of a Massachusetts family whose emotional and economic lives are disrupted by a series of unexpected earthquakes in the Boston area.

Strong Motion signaled the start of a turbulent decade for Franzen, as he suffered personal losses—the death of his father; divorce from Valerie Cornell, his wife of fourteen years—and struggled to come to terms with the purpose of writing fiction after his first two novels won critical praise but dishearteningly few readers. Those struggles were the subject of much of the searching nonfiction he wrote during the nineties, and his midcareer masterpiece *The Corrections* (2001) was the outcome. The expansive saga of a disjointed Midwestern family, *The Corrections* won the National Book Award and the James Tait Black Memorial Prize, and introduced Franzen, then a relatively obscure author of ambitious fiction, to the broad audience of readers he had long been seeking—a broader audience than any literary novelist of his generation.

The following interview took place over two days in an office borrowed from the University of California, Santa Cruz. Situated amid redwoods on the mountain rim above Santa Cruz and Monterey Bay, the office would have offered an ocean view, but a makeshift arrangement of towels, bedsheets, and pillows had been engineered to block out the combined dangers of light and distraction. Improvised window treatments aside, Franzen prefers his work space to resemble Renée Seitchek's house in *Strong Motion*—a “bare, clean place.” Aside from a laptop, the only personal items in the room were six books, arranged in a single pile: a study of William Faulkner, Friedrich Nietzsche's *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, and four works by John Steinbeck.

THE PARIS REVIEW

INTERVIEW #207

INTERVIEWER (STEPHEN BURN)

Have you matured as a writer?

JONATHAN FRANZEN

When *The Twenty-Seventh City* was being misunderstood, and when *Strong Motion* was failing to find an audience, I assumed that the problem was not the writer but the wicked world. By the time I was working on *Freedom*, though, I could see that some of the contemporaneous criticisms of those books had probably been valid—that the first really was overdefended and inexplicably angry, and that the politics and thriller plotting (and, again, the inexplicable anger) of the second really were sometimes obtrusive. The writer's life is a life of revisions, and I came to think that what needed revision were my own earlier books.

One of the great problems for the novelist who persists is the shortage of material. We all solve the problem in different ways; some people do voluminous research on nineteenth-century Peru. The literature I'm interested in and want to produce is about taking the cover off our superficial lives and delving into the hot stuff underneath. After *The Corrections* I found myself thinking, What is my hot material? My Midwestern childhood, my parents, their marriage, my own marriage—I'd already written two books about this stuff, but I'd been younger and scared and less skilled when I wrote them. So one of the many programs in *Freedom* was to revisit the old material and do a better job.

INTERVIEWER

Better how?

FRANZEN

I understand better how much of writing a novel is about self-examination, self-transformation. I spend vastly more time nowadays trying to figure out what's stopping me from doing the

work, trying to figure out how I can become the person who can do the work, investigating the shame and fear: the shame of self-exposure, the fear of ridicule or condemnation, the fear of causing pain or harm. That kind of self-analysis was entirely absent with *The Twenty-Seventh City*, and almost entirely absent with *Strong Motion*. It became necessary for the first time with *The Corrections*. And it became the central project with *Freedom*—so much so that the actual writing of pages was almost like a treat I was given after doing the real work.

INTERVIEWER

There was a nine-year interlude between those two novels.

FRANZEN

The Corrections cast a shadow. The methods I'd developed for it—the hyper-vivid characters, the interlocking-novellas structure, the leitmotifs and extended metaphors—I felt I'd exploited as far as they could be exploited. But that didn't stop me from trying to write a *Corrections*-like book for several years and imagining that simply changing the structure or writing in the first person could spare me the work of becoming a different kind of writer. You always reach for the easy solution before you, in defeat, submit to the more difficult solution.

There certainly was no shortage of content by the middle of the last decade. The country was in the toilet, we'd become an international embarrassment, and those materialistic master languages that I'd mocked in *The Corrections* were becoming only more masterful. And I still had my own deep autobiographical material, which I'd employed in well-masked form in the first two novels. Eventually I realized that the only way forward was to go backward and engage again with certain very much unresolved moments in my earlier life. And that's what the project then became: to invent characters enough unlike me to bear the weight of my material without collapsing into characters too much like me.

INTERVIEWER

Your first publication was a collaborative play called *The Fig*

Connection, which you wrote in high school. What interested you about drama?

FRANZEN

I'm that oddity of a writer who had a good high-school experience, and I did a lot of acting in various plays. Theater for me was mainly a way of having fun in groups, as opposed to pairing off into couples who necked all night in a back seat. It was a kind of prolonged innocence. I wasn't particularly in love with the theater, and the plays that my friends and I wrote weren't literary. We were just making stuff up for fun. Until I was twenty-one, I had no concept of literature, really.

INTERVIEWER

Had your childhood been innocent, too?

FRANZEN

I always seemed to be the last person to find out about things that everybody else knew. I was literally still playing with building blocks, albeit artistically and with friends, during my senior year in high school.

INTERVIEWER

Was your writing encouraged at home?

FRANZEN

Mostly not, no. I hate the word *creative*, but it's not a bad description of my personality type, and there was no place for that in my parents' house. They considered art of all kinds, including creative writing, frivolous. Art was something I could do in my free time, and if I could get school credit for it, so much the better. But it was actively discouraged as a serious pursuit. My parents were dismayed and perplexed and angry when my older brother Tom stopped studying architecture and majored in film, and when he went to the Art Institute in Chicago and got an M.F.A. Tom was the only working artist I knew, and I idolized him and wanted to be like

him, rather than like my parents. But I'd seen the grief he'd gotten from them, so I kept my own plans secret for as long as possible.

My dad, although he didn't get a good formal education, was tremendously smart and curious. He read to me every night throughout my early childhood, always my dad, not my mom. Having grown up bathed nightly in his strong opinions, I became a fairly opinionated person myself and was happy to be able to keep him company. He read *Time* magazine cover to cover every week, and we talked about whatever was going on in the world. So, strangely, there was a lot of intellectual discussion in that otherwise unintellectual house. But there were no literary books on my parents' shelves. I had no category for what I wanted to do, and this was the great excitement of writing *The Fig Connection*, seeing how well it worked as a student drama, and then, wonder of wonders, getting it published. This was the moment when a world of possibility opened up: I remember thinking, I'm actually good at writing—and isn't this fun?

INTERVIEWER

It sounds like fun was an important part of your early writing.

FRANZEN

Fun is still an important part of writing. I want to bring pleasure with everything I write. Intellectual pleasure, emotional pleasure, linguistic pleasure, aesthetic pleasure. I have in my mind five hundred examples of novels that have given me pleasure, and I try to do work that gives back some of what those five hundred books have given me. The epigraph of *Strong Motion* is taken from Isaac Bashevis Singer, who is very simpatico in this regard. His Nobel speech, in which he asserts that the storyteller's primary responsibility is to entertain, made a deep impression on me.

INTERVIEWER

Do you feel burdened by that obligation to entertain?

FRANZEN

More motivated than burdened. It's hard to feel burdened by the

knowledge that pleasure-seeking people are actually looking forward to my next book. For the first half of my career, though, I had a very poor sense of who these people might be. Some snarky person in England once accused me of writing the *Harper's* essay "Why Bother?" as market research.

INTERVIEWER

How did you feel about that?

FRANZEN

Well, in a narrow sense, he was absolutely right. When your first two novels haven't found much of an audience, it makes sense to stop and try to figure out who *might* read a literary novel nowadays, and why they might be doing it.

And finding an audience has unquestionably changed the way I write. If there's a different feel to *Freedom* than to *The Corrections*, it's not unrelated to having met however many thousand readers on various book tours. These are the people who are reading books, caring about books, and bothering to come out on a rainy Tuesday night to hear somebody read aloud, as to a child, and then standing for half an hour waiting to get a scribble on the title page of a book they've spent money for. These people are my friends. I'm one of them myself. I once stood in a long signing line to get five seconds with William Gaddis, just so I could tell him how great I thought *The Recognitions* was. Not everything in the world needs to be laughed angrily at, you realize. There turn out to be more emotions available to a working writer than I might have guessed earlier on. And one of them might be love—love and gratitude.

I got a lot of attention as a kid because everyone else in the house was so much older than me. It was probably too much attention—that can be a burden—but one result is that I like attention. I just like attention, I do! But it's counterbalanced by a need and craving to be alone most of the time. This is one reason I've found being a writer a very suitable profession. You have the possibility of great bursts of satisfying attention, and then you're left alone.

INTERVIEWER

When did you begin to think of yourself as a writer?

FRANZEN

I had a notion of myself as a writerly person by the time I got to college, which meant that there were two things I could do: I could go out for the newspaper, and I could send things to the college literary magazines. I did both. But I hated being a journalist, because I was too shy to do interviews. I once got my friend Tom Hjelm and me in trouble by making him do an interview with the vice president of the college, as part of a news story I was writing, and then twisting the vice president's words to make him look bad. In many ways, Hjelm was the toughest critic I ever had. He was an E. B. White worshiper, and he loved to ridicule my worst sentences. We read each other's papers, too—there was a mutual-apprenticeship quality to our friendship.

INTERVIEWER

Was there a similar quality to your reading?

FRANZEN

It slowly became more serious in the course of four years of college. I'd read a lot as a kid—eight hours a day all summer, some summers—but it was mostly mysteries and popular science and science fiction. Then, because I went to college as a prospective physics major, I took only one class in English literature during my first three years, a survey of the modern English novel. Predictably, I was most smitten with Iris Murdoch. I was eighteen, and *A Severed Head* seemed to me a profound and important book.

The one writer I completely couldn't stand was D. H. Lawrence. I wanted to kill him for having inflicted *Sons and Lovers* on me. Much later, I went back and read the book again, or read half of it, because I felt that the Joey and Patty material in *Freedom* had some kinship with the Morels. And I could see why I'd hated it when I was eighteen: It hit way too close to home. But frankly I still found it kind of unbearable. I wanted to say to Lawrence, No, you have *not* found a way not to make Mrs. Morel's sexualized engulfment of her son icky and excruciating. In a way, it's great and heroic that

Lawrence was willing to write such an excruciating book, to lay it all out there. But for me the book also became a shining example of how not to approach this radioactive material—a reminder of the pressing need to find a structure and a tone and a point of view that would ironize it enough to make it *fun*.

My real problem with the survey class was that I was too young for it. Like most eighteen-year-olds, I didn't have enough experience to understand what the stakes even were in adult literature. Because I hadn't grown up in a household that placed any value on culture, literature was just a game to me, and writing was just a craft that I hoped to make a living with someday. I wrote whatever the newspaper editors assigned me to write and worked on my sentences.

INTERVIEWER

Do you recall any pieces in particular?

FRANZEN

The piece I had the most fun with was a fall campus-fashion preview. I wrote it as a joke, in very ornate prose.

INTERVIEWER

There are several fashion articles in the archive.

FRANZEN

Several articles? Good Lord. I was having a bad time at school. Those fashion pieces probably came out of a wish to antagonize.

INTERVIEWER

A bad time?

FRANZEN

I had bad dorm rooms, and I'd landed in a nerdy situation as a prospective physics major. There were very few cute girls, and those few had no interest in me. My only significant ambition was

to get laid, and I was failing spectacularly at it, for reasons now obvious to me but completely invisible at the time. I thought about transferring to a different school, but then I realized that if I majored in German I could go to Europe for a year, and that things might be better there.

Things were not better there, at least not girlwise. But I came back to the States less outrageously immature. And every once in a while a person's life feels like a novel, and the eight weeks in the middle of my last year of college were a time like that. Everything came together quickly, all the stuff that had been latent suddenly crystallized, and I felt transformed in the space of eight weeks. I became a human being. By the end of that January, I was having sex with the person I would end up married to for fourteen years, and I'd become a determined, focused writer who wanted to do nothing but write ambitious novels.

INTERVIEWER

What had happened?

FRANZEN

I wrote about it in *The Discomfort Zone*—my discovery, as Rilke puts it in *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, that I had an interior life I'd previously known nothing about. It had to do with reading Rilke and Kafka and the other modern German prose writers, and it had to do with my brother Tom. It had to do with having been away from my family for so long—with coming back and suddenly being able to see them in the framework that the German moderns had given me. It had to do with falling in love.

INTERVIEWER

What about your brother?

FRANZEN

I was in deep emulation of Tom, who had begun as a still photographer and then moved into avant-garde film. I admired Tom's equipment, as it were. Right before I'd gone to Germany, I'd worked for him as a laborer in Chicago and had made enough

money to buy a little Olympus, the smallest SLR on the market, which I took to Europe and tried to do art photography with. I wanted to take odd pictures, especially ones of the industrial areas, again in emulation of Tom, who had an urban-industrial aesthetic.

But I always had an uneasy relationship with pictures. I could never figure out what I was trying to do with photography. Landscape photography in particular: Oh, it's a pretty sunset. Oh, that's a pretty rock formation. Who the fuck cares? I'd come to associate it with what I perceived as my mother's obsession with appearances—her dictating what I wore to school, her constant fussing with the decoration of our house, her shame about having kids who were different from her friends' kids, the general barrenness of worrying so much about surfaces. A persistent fantasy I had throughout my late teens and twenties was that I was being followed with a camera, and that people who hadn't respected me enough, girls who hadn't wanted me, would see where I was now and be impressed. It was an awful reverie, because I could feel, even as I was having it, that it was an inheritance of that obsession with surfaces.

In the spring of my junior year in Europe, Tom had come over and traveled with me, and when we were in Milan his movie camera was stolen. By the following Christmas, it was clear that he wasn't going to get a new one. He'd given up filmmaking, and I now had the burden and the opportunity to be the family artist. And, specifically, to be a writer, given my disenchantment with images.

INTERVIEWER

Is that obsession with appearances still a concern to you?

FRANZEN

Exhibitionism is a problem for any writer. The craving for an audience, coupled with the shame of exposing yourself to it. This is stuff that I was always tormented by and have been working through as recently as in *Freedom*.

But I had all the clues I needed in Germany, in Nietzsche: "Everything that is deep loves the mask." *The Twenty-Seventh City* is one big mask. And the long-term ambition for all my work has been

to find better and better masks—to find the means to make visible and feelable the unsayable things inside me.

INTERVIEWER

How did you accomplish it?

FRANZEN

I was a skinny, scared kid trying to write a big novel. The mask I donned was that of a rhetorically airtight, extremely smart, extremely knowledgeable middle-aged writer. To write about what was really going on in me with respect to my parents, with respect to my wife, with respect to my sense of self, with respect to my masculinity—there was just no way I could bring that to the surface. I'd tried writing about it directly in short stories before I got going with *The Twenty-Seventh City*, and I just hadn't had the chops to get at it, didn't have enough distance on it, didn't understand it well enough. So I put on the mask of a middle-aged postmodern writer.

Looking back now, I see a twenty-five-year-old with a very compromised sense of masculinity, of his own maleness. There was a direct transfer of libido to the brain—this was my way of leaving the penis out of the equation and going with what I knew I had, which was that I was smarter than most people. It had been drummed into me by my dad: “You are smarter than most people.” He felt himself to be smarter than most people, probably rightly so. He felt that it had taken him too long to figure this out, and he said to me, many times, “Don't make the mistake I made.” So I set a lot of store in being brainy. And satire was particularly appealing, because, first, it was funny, and I always liked to be funny, and, second, you didn't have to take responsibility for generating your own faith, your own core beliefs. You could simply expose the mendacity and falseness of others. It was a way for the baby of his family—who'd been surrounded, as a kid, by three powerful male presences—to exercise some kind of mastery and cut other people down to size. And, no less important, it was a way to ignore the maternal side of the equation. During those amazing winter weeks of 1980 and 1981, my mother had literally been made sick, seriously ill, by news about the sex life of one of my brothers. I'd

seen firsthand that the mere expression of overt masculine sexuality could put a woman in the hospital! So it's really no wonder that intellect presented itself as a safer alternative in *The Twenty-Seventh City*.

In the later books, as I began to put the worst of my own *Sons and Lovers* psychodramas behind me, I reached for different kinds of masks. The reason it took so long to do *Freedom* was that the masks not only had to be extremely lifelike but also had to be invented out of whole cloth, because, again, after much trying and failing, I'd seen that there was no way I could write directly about certain central parts of my own experience, my experience with my mom and my experience in my marriage. What made direct revelation impossible was partly my sense of shame and partly a wish to protect third parties, but it was mostly because the material was so hot that it deformed the writing whenever I came at it directly. And so, layer by layer, I built up the masks. Like with papier-mâché, strip after strip, molding ever more lifelike features, in order to perform the otherwise unperformable personal drama.

INTERVIEWER

The mask is a way to convey truth, rather than to conceal it.

FRANZEN

Yes. But also recognizing, crucially, that the amorphous, unconscious, naked soul is a horror. The most terrifying scene in Rilke's *Malte Laurids Brigge* is the one in which Malte, as a boy, starts putting on party masks from a trunk in his family's attic, one after another, until finally one of them takes control of him. He sees his masked self in the mirror and goes momentarily insane with terror that there is no him, there's only the mask. Years later, as an adult, walking around in Paris, he sees a woman on a park bench who puts her face in her hands and then looks up with a naked face, a horrifying Nothing, having left the mask in her hands. *Malte* is essentially the story of a young writer working through a fear of masks to a recognition of their necessity.

Rilke anticipated the postmodern insight that there is no personality, there are just these various intersecting fields: that personality is socially constructed, genetically constructed,

linguistically constructed, constructed by upbringing. Where the postmoderns go wrong is in positing a nullity behind all that. It's not a nullity, it's something raw and frightening and bottomless. It's what Murakami goes looking for in the well in *The Wind-up Bird Chronicle*. To ignore it is to deny your humanity.

INTERVIEWER

The development of the American writer today most typically takes place within the university, in creative-writing programs. Did you consider that route?

FRANZEN

I got married instead to a tough reader with great taste. We had our own little round-the-clock M.F.A. program. This phase of our marriage went on for about six years, which is three times longer than the usual program. Plus, we didn't have to deal with all the stupid responses to writing that workshops generate.

We did actually apply to some programs one year, in hopes of getting a university to support us financially, and we were both accepted at Brown. But the money Brown offered wasn't good enough. In hindsight, I'm glad I didn't go, because it might have smoothed some kinks out of the work that were better not smoothed out. As a journalist, I'm always striving to become more professional, but as a fiction writer I'd rather remain an amateur.

INTERVIEWER

Did you devise another kind of program for yourselves? Did you go to readings?

FRANZEN

No, we didn't want to be around other writers. In some semiconscious way, we recognized that we weren't good yet, and we needed to protect ourselves from depressing exposure to people who'd already gotten to be good.

INTERVIEWER

What books were you reading in those years?

FRANZEN

Everything. I read fiction four or five hours a night every night for five years. Worked through Dickens, the Russians, the French, the moderns, the postmoderns. It was like a return to the long reading summers of my youth, but now I was reading literature, getting a sense of all the ways a story could be made.

But the primal books for me remained the ones I'd encountered in the fall of 1980: *Malte*, *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, *The Magic Mountain*, and, above all, *The Trial*. In each of these books the fundamental story is the same. There are these superficial arrangements; there is the life we think we have, this very much socially constructed life that is comfortable or uncomfortable but nonetheless what we think of as "our life." And there's something else underneath it, which was represented by all of those German-language writers as Death. There's this awful truth, this maskless self, underlying everything. And what was striking about all four of those great books was that each of them found the drama in blowing the cover off a life. You start with an individual who is in some way defended, and you strip away or just explode the surface and force that character into confrontation with what's underneath. This was very straightforwardly and explicitly the program with *The Twenty-Seventh City*, to take the well-defended Probst and strip away and strip away.

INTERVIEWER

And you saw Martin Probst as a parallel to Joseph K.?

FRANZEN

Yes, in my own vulgar reading of Kafka, I did. Suddenly one day, for no reason, there were a bunch of Indians in St. Louis, and they were conspiring to ruin Probst's life.

INTERVIEWER

I recall reading that you labored over the beginning of *The Twenty-Seventh City*—wrote and rewrote it—and then wrote the final stages

FRANZEN

Most of the book.

INTERVIEWER

Most of the book, quite quickly.

FRANZEN

I'd started by working for months and months on the first chapter, which was about Probst walking his dog and thinking with culpably extreme satisfaction about his accomplishments. I poured countless hours into very purple sentences describing the beauty of the light in Webster Groves, my hometown, on a late weekday afternoon. It was a chapter that ended with the death of the dog. It was terribly overwritten.

INTERVIEWER

What do you mean by overwritten?

FRANZEN

Trying to do too much with a sentence. I was very much still under the spell of the Germans. You can do things in German with sentence structure that are less advisable in English—pack in all sorts of syntactical elements before the final verb. I was playing with language and with the possibilities of sound, although not so much with alliteration. I'd read *Rabbit, Run* at a certain point and spent a couple of weeks being highly alliterative before coming to my senses and realizing that not only was my alliteration bad, Updike's was, too.

I was doing a lot of punning, though. I was very attached at that young age to pure linguistic play, and blissfully unaware of how it might all read. I thought the concept of my book, the unfolding of a conspiracy, ought to be strong enough to drag the reader through any amount of linguistic playfulness.

I was reaching; I was writing about stuff I didn't really know

anything about and trying to incorporate every scrap of information and interesting observation I'd ever had. I would write as many pages as I could in a day. I once wrote seventeen pages in a day. And those seventeen pages are in the finished book. When I got rolling, my determination to get the book done and have it be good and get it published was so strong that I had limitless energy. The finished manuscript was thirteen hundred pages. I was twenty-five.

INTERVIEWER

You've said you were writing eight hours a day.

FRANZEN

I could do ten sometimes.

INTERVIEWER

Even when things weren't working?

FRANZEN

I didn't have the experience of things not working. I didn't know enough to know when something wasn't all that good. The chapters just came clattering out.

INTERVIEWER

I'm struck by the number of dream sequences in *The Twenty-Seventh City*.

FRANZEN

More and more, I think of novel writing as a kind of deliberate dreaming. John Gardner described novels as "vivid, continuous dreams," and though I'm not sure Gardner ever wrote a particularly excellent novel, he was right about the notion of the dream. A notion reinforced by my feeling that all of Kafka's fiction reads like transcribed dreams.

Most of the dreams in *The Twenty-Seventh City* were dreams I'd had myself. I wanted their uncanniness because I was trying to

write an uncanny book. A book about making strange a familiar place. And the fastest route to uncanniness is to fall asleep and have a dream in which everything is at once familiar and strange. That was the feel I was after in that book: What kind of weird, surreal world have I fallen into here, in the most boring of Midwestern cities?

If the dreams are falling away in the later books, I'd like to think it's because I'm getting better at making the book itself the dream. As I become more comfortable with accessing the primary psychic stuff inside me, and finding adequate dramatic vehicles for it, the need for the literal dream probably diminishes.

INTERVIEWER

How did you compose the book?

FRANZEN

I typed *The Twenty-Seventh City* on a Silver Reed typewriter. Then I set the book aside for nearly a year while I tried to find an agent. In hindsight, the responses of the top-drawer agents I'd sent it to seem remarkably gracious, although I didn't experience them that way at the time. Gloria Loomis told me on the phone, with a little laugh, "I'll get back to you when I've read the second—*box*."

That's when I did a translation of *Spring Awakening*, and I was working on some short stories again, with no more success than before. When I struck out with the agents, I called up the only writer I had any personal connection to, Hugh Nissenson, the novelist, and he proceeded to froth at the mouth for an hour about how stupid and corrupt the publishing industry was, and how lazy certain well-known writers were—it was somewhat embittered frothing. Then he asked me, "How long is the book?" And I told him, and he said, "I'm not going to read your book, but I can tell you right now it's two times too long. You've got to go back and cut it by half." Then he said, "Is there a lot of sex in it? There's gotta be a lot of sex in it."

It was a wonderful gift. I set down the phone and picked up the manuscript, which I hadn't looked at in eight months, and I said, "My God, there's two hundred pages that I can cut in half an hour." I just suddenly saw it. I suddenly made the connection between my

needs as a reader and what I was doing as a writer, which I had never made before. That in fact I was not interested in punishing the reader, because I didn't enjoy being punished myself. If I wanted the book to be read, it needed to move, and so I had to make the cuts to make it move.

INTERVIEWER

David Foster Wallace wrote to you in the summer of 1988, after reading *The Twenty-Seventh City*.

FRANZEN

Yes.

INTERVIEWER

When did you meet?

FRANZEN

I don't think we succeeded in meeting until 1990. I was away in Europe for a year, and he flaked on our first two appointments to meet, for reasons that became clearer later. It's a telltale sign of a substance problem when people don't show up.

INTERVIEWER

Was this your first friendship with another writer?

FRANZEN

Well, apart from my wife, yes. Around the same time, I also got to know Bill Vollmann, who was living in New York then.

INTERVIEWER

And what difference did this make?

FRANZEN

It's all bound up in [the story of my marriage](#), which I really would prefer not to get into here. But, briefly put, it was a very hermetic marriage, and simply to be in conversation with other people who I thought were doing good work—and also to get their take on my marital situation—was huge. Soon after that, I got to know David Means, too. So right around the beginning of the nineties I suddenly had three male writer friends, as opposed to none. And because I was entering a period of radical doubt about the point of writing literary novels, it was an incredible blessing to talk with other people who were ambitious and thoughtful and talented, who were dedicating their lives to trying to write good books.

INTERVIEWER

You've said that you and Wallace corresponded about fiction less than people might expect.

FRANZEN

At a certain point, you get to be good enough friends that you pick up the phone rather than writing a letter. The letter-writing phase is sort of a “feeling out each other's position” phase. I came into those conversations with a feeling of an unattractively extreme rage against literary theory and the politicization of academic English departments. It was related to my growing antagonism toward a status model of the novel—the idea that a novel's highest achievement is to be read and studied by scholars. And yet my own attempts to connect with a larger audience had so far failed. Dave was very comfortable in the academy, but he himself was going through experiences that were making clear that there was more to life than producing interesting texts that a small number of very smart readers might engage with. His own life was in crisis, and he was coming into new material, his authentic personal material, and so he, too, welcomed a conversation about how to move beyond pure intellectual play into realms of, for want of a better word, emotional significance. The point of agreement that he and I eventually reached was the notion of loneliness: that fiction is a particularly effective way for strangers to connect across time and distance. The formulation had slightly different meanings for the two of us, but it was the bridge we eventually found to connect his

view to my view.

INTERVIEWER

And the difference?

FRANZEN

I took the notion, finally, as a call to arms to continue trying to write books that ordinary people, nonprofessionals, could connect with. I think that Dave, up to the time when he stopped writing, was still struggling with his distrust of the part of himself that wanted to please people.

I perceived, rightly or wrongly, that our friendship was haunted by a competition between the writer who was pursuing art for art's sake and the writer who was trying to be out in the world. The art-for-art's-sake writer gets a certain kind of cult credibility, gets books written about his or her work, whereas the writer out in the world gets public attention and money. Like I say, I perceived this as a competition, but I don't know for a fact that Dave perceived it that way. There's some evidence that he did, but he was a troubled person and was tormented by the possibility of people misperceiving him. His instinct was to keep people at a distance and let the work speak for itself, and I do know that he enjoyed the status he'd attained. He might have denied it, but he denied all sorts of obviously true things at different moments. He came from an academic family, and the fact that lots of books were being written about his work really was gratifying to him. In the way that sibling competition works, I've consistently maintained a position of not caring about that stuff. And Dave's level of purely linguistic achievement was turf that I knew better than to try to compete on.

INTERVIEWER

When did you first come across DeLillo?

FRANZEN

I remember a Christmas visit to my wife's family during which she gave me *Players*. I remember reading it on the train back up to Boston and having one of the purest aesthetic responses I've ever

had. I'd finally found somebody who was putting on the page the apocalyptic, postindustrial urban aesthetic that I'd been looking for in film and photographs and had found expressed in music, particularly by Talking Heads. And here was somebody who was getting it on the page and writing like a dream. His prose was like a call to duty: You must write better. Here, see, it can be done. I find it remarkable that people don't talk more about *Players*. In certain ways, DeLillo never wrote better.

INTERVIEWER

What did you find so attractive about him?

FRANZEN

It came as no surprise when I learned, later, that he sometimes composed books with one paragraph on each page, starting a new page after only a few sentences. His paragraphs really do have a stand-alone quality. It was through reading him that I came to see pages as collections of individual sentences. For a young writer, in particular, the terrors of the paragraph become more manageable when you see it as a system of sentences. I also started to see all the junk DNA that had cluttered my paragraphs before then, and that I'd been unaware of.

INTERVIEWER

DeLillo's sentences seem to involve intimate connections between individual words, even letters—a visual patterning.

FRANZEN

Yes. In my own work, I can see his visual influence in the dinner-table scene in *The Corrections* that I wrote immediately after reading *Underworld*. But I don't think my pages read like his, because I had a preference for rounder letters—*c*'s and *p*'s. I think of him as being more into *l*'s and *a*'s and *i*'s.

INTERVIEWER

C's and *p*'s?

FRANZEN

I kept seeing a plate of food with beet greens and liver and rutabaga—intense purple green, intense orange, rich rusty brown—and feeling a wish to write sentences that were juicy and sensuous.

INTERVIEWER

Do you mean the sound, too?

FRANZEN

No, the way they looked, the roundness of *b*'s and *g*'s, the juiciness. That's almost the last time I remember thinking about the words that way. Nowadays I have almost the opposite aesthetic—I'm looking for transparency.

INTERVIEWER

And when did you discover Pynchon?

FRANZEN

I'd come up with the plot of *The Twenty-Seventh City* when I was a college sophomore, in a playwriting workshop, and our instructor had told me I'd better take a look at Pynchon. I finally got around to it after I graduated and went back to Germany. I took *Gravity's Rainbow* along in mass-market paperback, and it utterly consumed me. It was like getting the flu to read that book. It was like I was fighting off some very aggressive infection. I started writing Pynchonian letters to my then-fiancée, and I think it's significant that she hated those letters and made her hatred of them known, and that I steered away from that voice—because of our relationship, because of an intense relationship with a woman. Which now seems to me emblematic: You could either play with the boys like that, and relegate women to minor and substantially objectified characters on the margin, or you could try to have a full-fledged relationship with a woman, in which case that kind of boy writing, however brilliant and masterful, was necessarily subordinate. It's worth noting that at this point in my life, I feel much more indebted to various female writers—Alice Munro,

Christina Stead, Flannery O'Connor, Jane Smiley, Paula Fox, to name a few—than I do to Pynchon.

INTERVIEWER

What about the letters was Pynchonian?

FRANZEN

The tangly sentences, the overfullness of them, and a kind of dirty explicitness. A hipster jadedness. “Seen it all, done it all, don’t mean shit.” Like the dark side of R. Crumb.

And yet Pynchon’s enterprise in that book—creating an immensely complex world in which conspiracy is the organizing principle—was something I internalized and tried to build on. I saw that I might be able to go beyond the unseen conspiracy to a *seen* conspiracy, inhabited by complicated characters with whom we might, moreover, sympathize. To turn the whole notion of the victim of conspiracy inside out and make the victim himself a problematic figure and the conspirators perhaps well justified. That was my best shot, as a twenty-three-year-old, at dealing with my brief but life-threatening infection with Pynchon.

INTERVIEWER

And that infection did not last to your later novels?

FRANZEN

No. Even in my first book, I found a better model in Coover. He had some of the same satiric and encyclopedic ambitions as Pynchon, but he was working at the level of characters and their relationships to one another, and I just gravitated to that.

INTERVIEWER

You’ve described your first two books as “systems novels.”

FRANZEN

I had an idea of the social novel that I didn’t realize was already

outmoded. I rather naively believed that, if I could capture the way large systems work, readers would understand their place in those systems better and make better political decisions. I'd taken real delight in the books of the previous generation that had revealed these kinds of systems to me. In *The Twenty-Seventh City*, the systems were city and county government and regional economics. And there were various systems in *Strong Motion*, most notably the systems of science and religion—two violently opposing systems of making sense in the world.

This conception of the novel, I think, came out of my engagement with science fiction, which is all about concepts. You have a cool idea: What if we could travel back in time? What if in the future there's only one sex? And then the characters come into being to make that story happen. Going into my first two books, I did have several characters firmly stuck in my head, but many of the smaller characters were invented to serve the systems. Whereas, in my last two novels, the systems are there to serve the characters. There are lingering elements of the old method in *The Corrections*—I'd been fascinated, for example, by my parents' stories of cruises and, like Dave Wallace, I saw the cruise ship as somehow emblematic of our time. But my priorities have mostly flipped.

INTERVIEWER

How did you begin to write *Strong Motion*?

FRANZEN

A bunch of things had happened. My first book had been published, and my wife and I had fled to Europe; things were getting hard in the marriage. And, perhaps not coincidentally, I'd fallen under the spell of religious writers, particularly Flannery O'Connor and Dostoyevsky. My wife and I began touring cathedrals and looking at medieval sculpture and Romanesque churches. *Wise Blood*, *The Brothers Karamazov*, and the cathedral at Chartres are all examples of religious art, which is neither just religion nor just art; it's a special category, a special binding of the aesthetic and the devotional. O'Connor and Dostoyevsky venture intensely into the extremes of human psychology, but always with serious moral purpose. Because of the difficulties in my marriage, I was attracted

to their search for moral purpose in emotional extremity. I imagined static lives being disrupted from without—literally shaken. I imagined violent scenes that would strip away the veneer and get people shouting angry moral truths at each other. I had the title *Strong Motion* very early on.

INTERVIEWER

When had you become interested in earthquakes?

FRANZEN

I'd been a research assistant in seismology—this was the excellent job that had funded the writing of *The Twenty-Seventh City*—and so I knew a lot about it, including the fact that human beings can cause earthquakes by pumping liquids underground. There are very few bridges between the geologic scale and the human scale, between the large forces of nature and the small forces of the heart, and I recognized early on that the phenomenon of humanly induced seismicity was kind of a gold mine literarily.

But *Strong Motion* is mainly a novel about an intense love affair. It spins outward from there to encompass an alternative Boston in which earthquakes are occurring. By that point in my life, relationships, for want of a better word, had presented themselves as being of undeniable primary importance. The conflict in my marriage could no longer be ignored.

INTERVIEWER

And that found its way into the novel?

FRANZEN

Strong Motion was a novel written by a person to whom things were happening as he wrote it. It was a third party in the relationship. My wife's own second novel was a fourth party. We brought these two extra figures into the house, so as to have much longer and more complicated discussions and fights. But I honestly have a poor recollection of how I wrote that book. It was a bad time, and we were traveling a lot—running, really—attempting geographic solutions to non-geographic problems.

One of the lines from *The Trial* that has always stayed with me is, approximately, “He had so much important, urgent work to do at the office, and he was losing so much time to his trial. Precisely now, when he needed to devote all his wits and strength and attention to his career, he instead had to worry about his trial.” When I think about my own trajectory as a writer, it’s in those terms. I began with an ambitious wish to be a writer of a certain stature, and to be mentioned in the company of such and such, and to produce a certain kind of masterful book that engages with contemporary culture and all that. I wanted to get on with the serious business of being an ambitious writer, but there was this damn trial welling up from within. It was certainly true in *Strong Motion*, when things were getting hard in the marriage, and it became all the more true in *The Corrections*. Precisely then, when I needed to focus all of my attention on writing a novel, my parents were falling apart. If you suffer with that for enough years, it eventually dawns on you that, in fact, you’ve misconstrued the real work of being a novelist.

INTERVIEWER

You once described *The Corrections* as an attack on the novel’s enemies, as an argument for the novel.

FRANZEN

The enemy I had in mind was materialism. The fear out of which that book was written was that the new materialism of the brain, which has given us drugs to change our personalities, and the materialism of consumer culture, which provides endless distractions and encourages the endless pursuit of more goods, were both antithetical to the project of literature, which is to connect with that which is unchanging and unchangeable, the tragic dimension of life.

INTERVIEWER

Patty describes the responsibility of parents to raise children who recognize reality.

FRANZEN

I am indeed interested in self-deception. Realist fiction presupposes that the author has access to the truth. It implies a superiority of the author to his or her comically blundering characters. *The Corrections* was written as a comedy, a somewhat angry comedy, and so the self-deception model worked perfectly. Self-deception is funny, and the writer gets to aggressively inflict painful knowledge on one character after another.

In *Freedom*, the recurrent metaphor is sleepwalking. Not that you're deceiving yourself—you're simply asleep, you're not paying attention, you're in some sort of dream state. *The Corrections* was preoccupied with the unreal, willfully self-deceptive worlds we make for ourselves to live in. You know, enchantment has a positive connotation, but even in fairy tales it's not a good thing, usually. When you're under enchantment, you're lost to the world. And the realist writer can play a useful and entertaining role in violently breaking the spell. But something about the position this puts the writer in, as a possessor of truth, as an epistemological enforcer, has come to make me uncomfortable. I've become more interested in joining the characters in their dream, and experiencing it with them, and less interested in the mere fact that it's a dream.

INTERVIEWER

The Corrections was your first effort to build a novel around Andy Aberant, but eventually you excised him, as you would later from *Freedom*.

FRANZEN

Yes, Andy of the undead has now failed twice to make the cut. He was a self-consciously morally compromised character, first as a Securities and Exchange Commission attorney, later as the operator of a bogus land trust. In *The Corrections* I imagined him involving himself in a family that was really, really shut down, and coming to have a relationship with each member of the family, helping them achieve what they couldn't achieve themselves. I'm always looking for ways to see things through fresh eyes, and it seemed to me potentially interesting to observe a family from the perspective of an essentially adopted son—"self-adopted in adulthood" was the

notion. It was akin to observing the Probsts through the eyes and ears of those eavesdropping Indians.

INTERVIEWER

In an early section, [published in *Granta*](#), you say that Andy came into the world needing people to believe that he knew everything.

FRANZEN

One of the reasons Andy never worked is that he was too much like me, at least the depressive side of me. I get depressed when I'm failing to get a novel going, and Andy seems to come along as the voice of my depressive, hyperintellectual distance from my own life. If he'd ever been able to rise to the level of parody, he might have worked as a character.

But those Lamberts just kept getting larger and larger. Alfred and Enid were always Alfred and Enid, their voices were taken from life. My parents were *not* Alfred and Enid, but on bad days they could sound like them. Chip and Gary and Denise had been floating around in my mind, in different avatars, for some years, with different occupations and in different situations. Figuring out how to gather these five characters into some believable semblance of a family took several very unpleasant years of false starts and note taking.

INTERVIEWER

The Corrections was the first book you wrote entirely on a computer.

FRANZEN

In terms of process, the one small difference between a typewriter and a computer is that a computer makes it easier to find fragments you've written and then forgotten about. When you work at a book for as long as I do, you end up doing a lot of assemblage from scavenged materials. And with a computer you're more likely, on a slow morning, to drift over to another file folder and open up something old. Chunks of text travel with you, rather than getting buried in a drawer or stored in some remote, inaccessible location.

One afternoon in 1995 I wrote six or eight pages about the

gerontocracy of St. Jude, based on some Midwestern houses that I happened to know well. I'd just finished reading the manuscript of *Infinite Jest*. I'd been trying for several years to launch a grotesquely overplotted novel about Philadelphia and prisons, and reading a good friend's amazing manuscript roused me from my dogmatic slumbers, so to speak. Around the same time, I was also working on a short story about a person living in New York, trying to have a life, trying to make contact with women, and impeded by the fact that his father was sleeping in an enormous blue chair in his living room. I couldn't figure out where to go with the story, so I set it aside. But a few months later, when I desperately needed something to read at a *Paris Review*-sponsored event with David Means, I searched my computer and found these two chunks of writing that I could put together and read. Donald Antrim and Jeff Eugenides, whom I hardly knew, but who subsequently became good friends, came up afterward and said, "That was really good." *The Paris Review* went on to publish that chunk, and it became something I wanted to use in the novel, too.

INTERVIEWER

And it went smoothly after that?

FRANZEN

No. Then came further bad years, trying to make that ridiculous, overplotted monster work. It was finally another friend's work that roused me; I read the manuscript of *Underworld* on a Mexican vacation. I came home from that vacation and set aside the still-monstrous plot and plunged into the cruise-ship chapter and had an experience very similar to Alfred's in that chapter. I'd intended to write a simple, quick narrative about cruise-ship hilarities, and I fell through the surface of the present action into a long, long flashback. I was writing about an "ordinary" evening with the Lamberts—basically just a small drama of Chip's refusal to eat his food. But DeLillo's method in the recycling chapter of *Underworld*, where various lines of thought are crisply sorted into alternating paragraphs in the same way that his main character is sorting his household trash, had attuned me to how much suspense and foreboding you can create simply by deploying paragraph breaks. In

my case, I was sorting the family's four points of view by paragraph.

The writing process for that flashback was different from any process before or since, and it really changed my idea of what I was doing as a novelist. I'd quit cigarettes a month earlier, and as a result I was drinking tons of coffee. I'd get up in the morning and drink so much coffee that I made myself almost sick. Then I'd have to lie down and take a hard nap, which I could suddenly do because I was in better contact with my natural body rhythms. Instead of having a cigarette when I was feeling sleepy, why not just lie down and sleep? For the first time in my life, I could take these wonderful, intense twenty-minute naps. But then, because I was so loaded up with caffeine, I would come surging back up to the surface and go straight to the desk and write a page. And that was it for the day.

INTERVIEWER

Just one page?

FRANZEN

A page was enough, by then. If you read the biographies of people who have written good books, you often see the point where they suddenly come into themselves, and those weeks in the spring of 1997 were when I came into myself as a writer. They feel like some of the best weeks of writing I'll ever have. The discovery that I could write better about something as trivial as an ordinary family dinner than I could about the exploding prison population of the United States, and the corporatization of American life, and all the other things I'd been trying to do, was a real revelation.

INTERVIEWER

How did you conceive of the structure of the book?

FRANZEN

I was very aware of how time would be handled. Once I'd finally figured out that a large novel could be constructed out of multiple short novels, each of them building to a crisis in which the main

character can no longer escape reality, I had an opportunity to play with time management—how far back into the past to plunge after the opening section, how to parcel out the gradual return toward the present, where to situate the meeting of the backstory with the present story. I sketched out in pencil how the chronology would work in each of the five novellas, and I was pleased to have a different structure for each of them. I also liked the way the graphs looked: A horizontal line, representing the present action, was interrupted by chunks of backstory which would rise at various slopes like something surfacing. Like a missile rising up out of the past to intersect with a plane flying horizontally in the present.

INTERVIEWER

Both of your first two novels end with motion, with important issues still open, and that seems to offer an interesting contrast to the endings of your last two novels, which in certain ways are more tightly resolved.

FRANZEN

I can see that lack of resolution now as a young writer's move. You find that you have talent as a novelist, you understand a lot more about the world than many other people your age do, and yet you haven't lived enough—certainly I hadn't—to really have something to say. Everything is still guessed at, every conclusion is provisional. And this came to be my gripe with the postmodern aversion to closure. It's like, Grow up already! Take some responsibility for your narrative! I'm not looking for *the* meaning, but I am looking for *a* meaning, and you're denying me a vital element of making sense of any story, which is its ending! Aversion to closure can be refreshing at certain historical moments, when ossified cultural narratives need to be challenged. But it loses its subversive bite in a culture that celebrates eternal adolescence. It becomes part of the problem.

INTERVIEWER

Where were you writing *The Corrections*?

FRANZEN

I built an office up in Harlem in 1997. It had a huge south-facing window looking directly at 125th Street, which is one of the noisier streets of New York. I knew I had to block out the light, because the space was so intensely bright, but I also built a second window for sound protection.

Working without cigarettes had made me much more prone to distraction. Cigarettes had always been the way I'd snapped myself to attention. Cigarettes had made me smart, and smart had been the organizing principle for a couple of books. Smart had been the locus of my manhood, but it was no longer getting me anywhere. I'd quit because I'd decided that they were getting in the way of feeling. Without cigarettes, though, I was so easily irritated by even moderately bright light or moderate noise that I immediately became dependent on earplugs. They became a kind of a cigarette replacement, as did a darkened room. And that's been the scene ever since.

INTERVIEWER

Despite the silence, music often features in your books.

FRANZEN

I'm more envious of music than of any other art form—the way a song can take your head over and make you feel so intensely and so immediately. It's like snorting the powder, it goes straight to your brain.

Each of my books has had a set of songs associated with it. There's always rock and roll in the mix, but the most important music for *The Corrections* was probably *Petrushka*, the Stravinsky ballet. *Petrushka* corresponded not only to the feeling I was after but to the structure, too, the relation of tonally disparate parts to an ultimately unified whole. I also kept coming back to Steve Reich's *Music for 18 Musicians* as a model for the kind of metaphoric layering and interconnection I was after.

INTERVIEWER

The Corrections is full of references to the brain, but in *Freedom* the

whole language of brain chemistry and brain architecture barely registers.

FRANZEN

Well, you know, new times, new enemies. *Freedom* was conceived and eventually written in a decade where language was under as concerted an assault as we've seen in my lifetime. The propaganda of the Bush administration, its appropriation of words like *freedom* for cynical short-term political gain, was a clear and present danger. This was also the decade that brought us YouTube and universal cell-phone ownership and Facebook and Twitter. Which is to say: brought us a whole new world of busyness and distraction. So the defense of the novel moved to different fronts. Let's take one of those buzzwords, *freedom*, and try to restore it to its problematic glory. Let's redouble our efforts to write a book with a narrative strong enough to pull you into a place where you can feel and think in ways that are difficult when you're distracted and busy and electronically bombarded. The impulse to defend the novel, to defend the turf, is stronger than ever. But the foes change with the times.

INTERVIEWER

Did you conceive *Freedom* initially as a political novel?

FRANZEN

Yes, I spent several years looking for some interesting way into our national political narrative, some Washingtonian wrinkle that hadn't been explored to death in other media. But I couldn't find that wrinkle, and, frankly, I was also never able to get past my immediate partisan anger to the more open-minded place where truthful novels are written. I was making the same mistake I always seem to make initially, trying to write from the top down. I always have to learn the hard way to begin with character.

INTERVIEWER

When did you begin to see the shape of the book?

FRANZEN

Only near the end. As late as seven months before I handed it in, I had in mind a completely different form for the book. I thought it was going to be a novel of documents. My perennial refrain when I'm working is "I don't know what the book is about! I don't have a story!" Really only when the last couple of chapters come into focus does that refrain cease.

In the spring of 2007, after five years of periodic failure with the book, I'd made enough progress that I could have a very strong drink with my editor and sketch out a love-triangle story with a Patty-like character at its center. He said, "That sounds like a great, funny short novel, I'll give you a contract for it." So we wrote up a contract with a delivery date of ten months later, because I was still intending to write about politics and wanted the book out before the 2008 elections. I went to Berlin, to breathe the good old German literary air, and I tried to use the isolation and the deadline pressure to get some chapters banged out. But the characters weren't there yet. I came back home and flagellated myself all summer, but the characters still weren't there. Eventually I reached a point of such despair that I decided to take a year off.

INTERVIEWER

And you did take a year off?

FRANZEN

Well, nearly. I put five solid months into a *New Yorker* piece on the environmental situation in China. I also researched a second piece, a medium-term longitudinal study of twenty-two-year-olds arriving in New York City, fresh out of college. I ultimately decided not to write that one, out of kindness to my subjects, who were wonderful kids and said far more to a *New Yorker* reporter than they should have.

That piece grew out of my coming to terms with not having had children, my sense that I was getting old before my time, that I'd lost a vital connection with youth and thus with hope and possibility. The China piece came out of a question that Dave and I talked about constantly: How can we keep sitting in our rooms and struggling with fiction when there is so much wrong with the

world? During the summer after I signed the book contract, my sense of duty became utterly oppressive. So much bad stuff was happening in the country—and happening to wild birds around the world!—that I felt I just couldn't keep wasting months. I had to go out and do something, get my hands dirty with some problem. Only after the China piece failed to find a discernible audience or have any discernible impact did I get it through my head that I might actually have more effect on the world by retreating to my room and doing what I was put on earth to do.

INTERVIEWER

How do you know when the work is going well?

FRANZEN

The word I've been using to talk about that lately is *adequacy*. My primary reader and consultant for *Freedom* was my friend Elisabeth Robinson, who's been struggling with her own new novel, and one of her gifts to me was her saying, "You only have to make this book adequate." To which she was nice enough to add: "Your adequate is very good."

When I was younger, the main struggle was to be a "good writer." Now I more or less take my writing abilities for granted, although this doesn't mean I always write well. And, by a wide margin, I've never felt less self-consciously preoccupied with language than I did when I was writing *Freedom*. Over and over again, as I was producing chapters, I said to myself, "This feels nothing like the writing I did for twenty years—this just feels transparent." I wasn't seeing in the pages any of the signs I'd taken as encouraging when I was writing *The Corrections*. The sentences back then had had a pop. They were, you know, serious prose sentences, and I was able to vanquish my doubts simply by rereading them. When I was showing *Corrections* chapters to David Means, I basically expected his rubber stamp, because the sentences had a level of effulgence that left me totally defended. But here, with *Freedom*, I felt like, "Oh my God, I just wrote however many metaphor-free pages about some weird days in the life of a college student, I have no idea if this is any good." I needed validation in a way I never had before.

I was admittedly somewhat conscious that this was a good sign—

that it might mean that I was doing something different, pressing language more completely into the service of providing transparent access to the stories I was telling and to the characters in those stories. But it still felt like a leap into the void.

INTERVIEWER

It is often said about your recent books that they look more like nineteenth-century novels than twenty-first-century ones.

FRANZEN

The people at the Swedish Academy, who bestow the Nobel Prize, recently confessed their thoroughgoing lack of interest in American literary production. They say we're too insular, we're not writing about the world, we're only writing about ourselves. Given how Americanized the world has become, I think they're probably wrong about this—we probably say more about the world by writing about ourselves than a Swedish author does by writing about a trip to Africa. But even if they're right, I don't think our insularity is necessarily a bad thing.

Nineteenth-century Russia strikes me as a parallel. Russia is its own little world, famously good at repelling incursions by foreign powers, and it's maintained a separate superpower identity for centuries. Maybe that very insularity, that feeling of living in a complete but not quite universal world, creates certain kinds of literary possibility. All of those old Russians were dramatically engaged with the question of what would become of their country, and the question didn't seem inconsequential, because Russia was a vast nation. Whereas, when a Liechtensteiner wrestles with the future of Liechtenstein, who really cares? It's possible that the U.S. and Russia are exactly the right size to be hospitable to a certain kind of expansive novelistic project. England was, too, for a time, thanks to its empire, and the golden age of the English novel coincided with its imperial domination. There again, it wasn't the whole world, it was just a very large microcosm. True cosmopolitanism is incompatible with the novel, because novelists need particularity. But we also need some room to move around. And we're lucky to have both here.

That said, I don't feel particularly nineteenth century. All of the

issues that became problematic with modernism still need to be negotiated in every book.

INTERVIEWER

And yet it doesn't seem that novelty is all that important to you anymore.

FRANZEN

I'm wary of the pursuit of novelty for novelty's sake. At the same time, if I don't feel like I'm doing something new, I can't do anything. Reading time is so scarce nowadays, and alternative entertainment is so widely available, that I'm keenly attuned, as a reader, to whether a book's author seems to be experiencing something new or is just turning the crank.

There's always new content, of course. Content will carry you a certain distance; it can rescue you when you're in trouble formally. I think the importance of content is what Harold Bloom, for example, really underestimates in the novel. Bloom's at his best with poetry, because poetry is so purely language. But his approach becomes something close to nonsense when he applies it to novels, because he's still basically just looking at language. Language is important, absolutely, but the history of the novel is only partly stylistic. Faulkner obviously begat many influences, ditto Hemingway, ditto Joyce, ditto Carver and Lish, ditto DeLillo. But rhetorical innovation is just one of the many streams that feed into the river of fiction.

INTERVIEWER

Where do the modernists figure in your development?

FRANZEN

I have learned and feel I will continue to learn an enormous amount from Proust—his purely novelistic gifts, his recognition of how much you can gain by letting a story slowly extend over long stretches of time, his method of rendering the sense of gradual dawning as we live our lives. Things are not what they initially seem, things are often exactly the opposite of what they seem.

And Conrad: the prescience of *The Secret Agent*, the psychological brutality and intensity of *Victory*, the incisive critique of colonialism in *Nostromo*. Those books are marvels to me in both content and method. Conrad devotes the first half of *Nostromo* to slowly building to a set piece that he then omits, so that he can jump to a different place at a different time and blow your socks off there. He built himself up to a scene, he was then not interested in writing, at which point he miraculously discovered, "Oh, but there is a story here, it's just not the one I thought!" It's breathtaking. I love it, love it.

INTERVIEWER

You once gave a beautiful description of *Ulysses* as being like a cathedral.

FRANZEN

Maybe my Joyce time is still coming. I like *Portrait of the Artist* a lot. I like *Dubliners* even more. But I can never shake the feeling that, after those books, Joyce was chasing a certain kind of status. He was inventing the very category in which he wanted his work to place him. And that's where the cathedral image comes from: I'm going to build something grand that you're going to admire and study for decades. There's a sort of chilly Jesuitical quality to Joyce, and the Jesuits are, of course, great statusmongers and elitists. I'm an old egalitarian Midwesterner, and that kind of personality just rubs me the wrong way. I find someone like Beckett much more sympathetic. He's often harder to read than Joyce, so it's not a matter of the difficulty. It's the feeling that Beckett is going after a really personally felt horror and finding comedy and universality in that horror. He's obviously very concerned with language, but the language is in the service of something not merely thought but also *felt*. And that, to me, is a friendlier enterprise.

I should also say something about those words *status* and *contract*. Probably through faults of its own, my essay on literary difficulty and William Gaddis has been somewhat misunderstood. The primary thing I failed to make clear was that the terminology of *status* and *contract* was Gaddis's own. As far as one can tell from his rather confused and opaque nonfiction writings, he was a big status

guy. He seems to have believed that the world really was better off in the late Middle Ages than it is today, when the world is arranged by vulgar contract. He seems to have preferred the older status system, where high was high and low was low and great works of art were understood by very few. The reason I seized on those words is that *status* has another, more common meaning in this country—"status symbol," "literary status," and so on.

INTERVIEWER

Is the response of critics important to you?

FRANZEN

I'd be lying if I pretended that Terrence Rafferty's vicious review of *The Twenty-Seventh City* in *The New Yorker* didn't have an effect on the way I went about writing *Strong Motion*. Basically, though, with very few exceptions, I stopped reading my reviews after James Wood's piece on *The Corrections*. I'd looked forward to it because he can be a very perceptive reader, and I knew that we had some common enemies and enthusiasms. And what he wrote was a quibbling and carping and narrowly censorious thing, with a willfully dense misreading of my *Harper's* essay. That disappointment, along with fifteen unwisely spent minutes of Googling myself in 2001, pretty well cured me of the need to read about myself.

INTERVIEWER

And the overwhelming response to *Freedom* hasn't changed that?

FRANZEN

Nah.

INTERVIEWER

What are people missing or overlooking in your work?

FRANZEN

I think they may be overlooking *Strong Motion* a little bit. But what seems to me most often overlooked is that I consider myself essentially a comic writer. This was particularly true with *The Discomfort Zone*, which I wrote for laughs, and which I'm told wasn't laughed at in all quarters.

I'm reminded of a very earnest young Italian man who came up to me after a reading in Rome at which I'd read some of my [breakup stories](#). He said to me, with this kind of tragic face, "I don't understand. You're reading about people who are going through terrible pain, and everyone in the audience is laughing." I don't remember what I said to him, but I'd like to think I said, "Exactly."

THREE EARLY STORIES



Portrait of Jonathan Franzen
as a Young Man

1

BREAKUP STORIES

OUR FRIEND DANNI'S young husband had been intending, since before he was her husband, to talk about his feelings about having children, but because these feelings consisted mainly of reluctance and aversion, and because Danni, who was a few years older than he, was unmistakably determined to have a family, this conversation promised to be so unhappy that the young husband still hadn't managed to begin it by the time Danni reached a career plateau and announced that she was ready. The young husband told her that he needed to go to Burlington, Vermont. He said he needed to replenish his store of antique lumber for his custom-renovation business. From Burlington he called Danni every few days, sounding worried about her emotional state, but it was not until Danni received a card from the postal service, confirming the young husband's change of address, that she understood that he wasn't coming back. She said on the telephone, "Did you leave me? Are we not together anymore?" For the young husband, unfortunately, answering these questions would have meant initiating precisely the conversation that he couldn't bring himself to have. He replied that all of a sudden, in Vermont, nobody was naïve about lumber anymore. Every single person in the state seemed to know that antique thirty-foot oak beams now sold for three thousand dollars. Even very stupid and isolated rural people were aware of this. He said that, as information became cheaper, markets became more perfect and real bargains impossible to find. Probably online auction sites like eBay contributed to this trend, which was bad for entrepreneurs like himself but good for rural Vermonters, he had to admit. A few days later, while Danni was on a business trip, the young husband drove to New York in his pickup and fetched his personal things, including a sixty-pound chunk of maple burl, from their apartment on East Tenth Street. Even after Danni had met a twenty-seven-year-old psychotherapist and become pregnant with his child, the young husband remained unable to tell her that he didn't want children and should never have married her. The divorce was done by mail.

Danni's old college friend Stephen, a jazz guitarist and a fixture in

the downtown free-improv scene, had been living with a fabric designer named Jillian for seven years when he informed his friends that he was getting married. "Yeah, so, Jillian's the love of my life at the moment," he said, "and she really wants to make things official, so." Jillian had lately grown impatient with Stephen's poverty and his insistence on staying out until three every night and the favors he was always doing for nuns, such as giving nuns rides to family funerals in distant states or hauling around crappy nun furniture in a truck provided by his parish priest (Stephen had been schooled and intermittently raised by nuns), and it was Jillian's notion that marriage would settle Stephen down, make him less susceptible to the wishes of nuns and more susceptible to her own wishes, and he would start cleaning his fingernails better and getting home before midnight and so on. These expectations of Jillian's came as a surprise to Stephen once they were married. On the weekend after their little wedding, which was held on the lawn of an upstate friend in bright October sunshine, Stephen retiled the bathroom of a nun named Sister Doina and returned from a late-night gig near dawn. Jillian moved out three weeks later. When the time came for the newlyweds to use their plane tickets to Pittsburgh for Christmas, Jillian jostled her way through the US Airways concourse at LaGuardia, looking for the one seat that was maximally distant from each of the many barking airport TV screens. She knew she had finally located this seat when she found Stephen sitting in it, his fingers pressing on his special miniature deep-insertion stereo earphones, which doubled as noise-reducing earplugs. In Pittsburgh, he and Jillian received felicitations from eighty-odd party guests of Jillian's parents, who were well-to-do and had also bought the plane tickets, and for several nights the newlyweds had trembling, furtive kiddie sex in Jillian's childhood bed, although she had already filed New York State paperwork for a legal separation and was constantly on the phone with her new, non-Catholic, nonmusical boyfriend in Manhattan, reassuring him, every day, that she was so, so over Stephen.

A few months before Ron started introducing his friends to his new girlfriend, Lidia, his father died and left him enough money to buy the kind of West Village duplex that Ron had always wished he could afford. Ron taught philosophy at the New School. Over the years, he had confided to various friends that he feared his only purpose on the planet was to insert his penis in the vaginas of the

greatest possible number of women; the roster of insertees included both former students and students actively enrolled in one or more of his classes, various junior and senior New School faculty, fellow-guests at philosophy conferences in other cities, the grown daughters of his accountant and his wine dealer, the fabric designer Jillian, the girlfriend of a former next-door neighbor, and several female staff members at the local branch of the New York Sports Clubs. Ron's academic specialty was moral philosophy. A big reason women fell for him so hard was that he was a person of great feeling and conscience. He listened to women with patience and active sympathy; he was like the tender, respectful brother or father they'd always imagined having. And even though these were the very qualities that led women to invest their trust in him and thus advance what he feared was his sole mission in life, he genuinely was a nice man; there genuinely were good reasons that he had so many loyal friends. Which was why, as the years went by, he chastised himself so bitterly for his inability to stay faithful to any girl for longer than about sixty days. Every once in a while, he confessed his sins to his friends, who were grieved to see him suffering and beating up on himself and who hastened to reassure him that he was not a sick monster. His bad behavior caused him so much pain that you wanted to comfort him, not condemn him (although it certainly helped, in this regard, that you never got to see whatever pain his behavior might have caused the girls who trusted him). Whenever a new girl entered his life, he disappeared with her behind closed bedroom doors, as if to avoid potentially compromising interactions with his friends (in whose minds, as the years went by, his many identically slender and dark-eyed young dates and short-term girlfriends all kind of blurred together) and to minimize the fuss of dumping the girl when the time for dumping came. Finally, though, with the death of his father, and with his acquisition of a duplex on Bank Street, and with the looming of his fortieth birthday, Ron decided to put childish things behind him. Within weeks of meeting Lidia—a young Ecuadoran beauty from Jackson Heights who prosecuted drug cases for the Manhattan district attorney—he made a point of introducing her to all his friends. Sitting beside Lidia in various restaurant booths, he averred to his friends that he had finally met his intellectual match. While Lidia was in the bathroom, he further disclosed that his relationship with her was “basically a done deal,” that there was “no backing

out now,” that he and she were so definitely “on track to get married” that he was preparing to adopt her three-year-old daughter from her short-lived first marriage, and that, although it would obviously require titanic effort on his part, he was determined to stay faithful to Lidia for the rest of his life, because he was in awe of her intellect and she had such a great sense of humor. Ron delivered this huge news in a curiously abstract tone of voice, without meeting his friends’ eyes. When Lidia returned from the bathroom, having darkened her lipstick and mascara, Ron’s friends couldn’t help noticing that he sat facing away from her, leaving twelve or fifteen inches of space between them, and that she said “expresso” and “eck cetera” and “between you and I,” all of which famously grated on Ron’s ears. You almost got the sense that Ron wasn’t even listening to Lidia. While she spoke of their upcoming camping trip to British Columbia, glancing eagerly at Ron to reassure herself of his approval, he gazed off into the distance like a man trying to empty his mind while a phlebotomist took blood from his arm. Now and then he came back into focus, leaned over and put his arm around Lidia, and instructed her, for example, to tell his friends about the word she’d played in Scrabble the other night for eighty-seven points. Lidia lowered her eyes to her napkin. The word, she said, was “plenary”—not even that great a word. But Ron insisted that he had never seen this word before, that her vocabulary was much larger than his, and, absurdly, that he had never in his life scored eighty-seven points in one Scrabble play. “I’m happy,” he said simply, his body angled toward the restaurant’s front door. “I feel like I could be content to play Scrabble with Lidia for the rest of my life.” A few months later, during summer vacation, when some of his friends asked him how things were with Lidia, Ron sounded distracted and impatient, as if his feelings were well known by now and he found it weird even to be asked about them. He said that he and Lidia had recently passed their six-month mark and might as well be married—it was pretty much a done deal; he couldn’t back out now—and, yeah, O.K., sometimes it was hard to imagine having sex with the same one person for the rest of his life, but he was forty years old, and it was time to grow up, and he was committed to making this relationship work, and so, basically, yeah, things were really, really, really good between the two of them. A few weeks later, he dropped out of all voice, e-mail, and face-to-face contact. When he surfaced again,

toward the end of August, it was to send his friends terse e-mails with a new postal address and phone number. Pressed for an explanation, Ron replied in an irritated tone that he'd rented a two-room box on East Twenty-eighth Street and was working on his Heidegger book. Lidia he preferred not to talk about at all, though he did refer to a summer-school student named Kristin several times, and under close questioning he admitted that taking moral responsibility for his many broken promises to Lidia had been costly to him financially. Lidia was devastated, he said, when his involvement with Kristin came to light—an involvement that he didn't insult his friends' intelligence by pretending was going to last past Labor Day—and, since there was no conceivable excuse for his misbehavior, he'd made amends as well as he could by providing a thirty-per-cent down payment on a comfortable West End Avenue apartment, a classic six suitable for a single professional woman and her three-and-a-half-year-old daughter, which had necessitated putting the Bank Street duplex on the market and pricing it to sell, which was why he was now living in an anonymous box in Murray Hill. Ron was probably the world's leading authority on Heidegger's moral philosophy; he was renowned for his extemporaneous and wittily annotated classroom translations of knotty Greek and German texts; and so his friends, even his very smart friends, were simply too intimidated intellectually to question his cash payment of several hundred thousand dollars for the sin of cheating on his girlfriend of six months. That his real-estate transactions must already have been in motion even as he was assuring his friends that he and Lidia were practically married—that the entire private drama of exposure and shame and penance couldn't possibly have been jammed into the three and a half weeks that he'd dropped out of sight—became just another of the never-again-referred-to mysteries that were the price you paid for the pleasure of Ron's company.

Stephen's cousin Peter, on the other hand, when he'd been having unprotected sex with his Pilates instructor, Rebecca, frequently enough (and then some) to make her pregnant, went straight to his wife, Deanna, with whom he already had two children, and said that although he was committed to their marriage he was also in love with Rebecca, and he wanted to be involved with raising their child, and perhaps everyone could just learn to get along? Peter's plan was financially realistic—he was a radiation oncologist with a

busy uptown practice—and he felt that if Deanna was realistic herself she could hardly say no. Peter was a nice, late-blooming Midwestern boy who had married his plain and rather clingy college girlfriend and let her go to work at a bank to support him in med school. He could see now that a successful Manhattan oncologist could do a lot better, spouse-wise, than a sour, fussy, pinch-faced mom with large thighs, and that to stay with her would be like continuing to pay eighties-level interest rates while the rest of the world refinanced its mortgages—there was no earthly reason for it, basically—but, at the same time, he recognized that he owed a lot to Deanna, and he loved his kids, and one of the many excellent things about Rebecca was how comfortable she was with the idea of French-style family arrangements. So it wasn't like there were any jerks in the picture here. Everyone was doing his or her best to be nice and responsible while remaining, of course (as Peter stressed in his presentation to Deanna), *realistic*. It was only after Deanna had hired a capable lawyer and won full custody of the kids and a financially eviscerating divorce settlement that Peter realized how wrong he'd been, from the very beginning, about Deanna—she'd never really been nice at all! she was homely *and* mean!—and how lucky he was to have Rebecca, who was not just young and shapely but also (as witness her willingness to share Peter with Deanna) genuinely menschy, although, as he sometimes admitted to himself in the shower, or in bed at three in the morning, when his second Martini was wearing off, or when he happened to think of Deanna in her bloated new house up in Harrison, with her atrocious S.U.V., and caught himself mentally addressing her in terms like “Old Pig Eyes,” niceness was a relative term and Deanna probably viewed the matter somewhat differently.

Or, as Peter's friend Antonia liked to tell visitors to the high-floor parkside unit on Central Park West that she'd bought with the proceeds of her own divorce settlement, there came a point in every failing marriage when you found yourself in a room with a waxwork hologram of yourself: when you saw, through your spouse's demented eyes, the monster he projected in your place, a monster who resembled you superficially (though it was probably somewhat fatter and more wrinkly than you really were, just as his youthful idealization of you had probably been firmer and sexier than you'd really been back then) but was in every other respect a fantastic and wholly unfamiliar creature. Antonia made all her

visitors remove their shoes at the door to her place on the Park and never let more than one friend at a time come to see her; even her daughters had to visit one at a time, without bringing overnight guests or wearing shoes inside. These were just some little house rules that Antonia allowed herself to enforce after twenty-plus years of motherhood and hellish corporate-wifedom in Palo Alto. The decisive moment in her own marriage had come in her Palo Alto kitchen, after she made an unloving remark to her husband. The remark was no different from a thousand other unloving remarks she'd made in the previous ten years; but this time the husband, who was a small and mild and nose-scrunchingly nervous man with a face familiar to viewers of "Wall Street Week," grabbed her by the throat with his right hand and pressed his thumb into her windpipe. With his left hand, he pinned her wrists against her chest. He brought his face very close to hers, which was rapidly turning purple, and pleaded with her: "*Why are you doing this to me?*" To which Antonia could only say, "Kegh. Ecck!" And so the husband screamed directly in her face, "Why are you doing this to me! Would you please stop doing this to me!" As Antonia later told her visiting, shoeless friends, one by one, this was the moment when, in spite of her growing fear, she had suddenly seen herself as her husband saw her: as a crushingly strong and evil person who had been causing him terrible harm for many years; as the monstrous figure who kept him from attaining every pleasure and every freedom he'd ever wished for, who annihilated his manhood with her cunning and her wit. Nevertheless, she tried to point out the patent absurdity of his plea. "Guaggh—kgheck," she said. Some time later, when she regained consciousness, she found herself lying on her back on the kitchen floor. The husband was leaning against the utility island, eating a folded-over piece of sandwich-style rye bread. Antonia's throat was raw and clogged, but she had more of a sense of humor than of self-protection. "I was trying to say," she said, coughing as she laughed, "who's strangling who?" The husband's reply was matter-of-fact: "I wasn't strangling you." "Then why," Antonia said, "is my windpipe practically broken and me lying on the floor?" The husband stated flatly, "I never touched you." And the curious thing, Antonia told her friends, was that he believed what he was saying. And she saw what he meant, and she believed him, too; because how could he have touched her when she, the real she, wasn't even in the same room (or, possibly, the

same universe) that he was in? Nevertheless, she said, it worried her to see him behaving psychotically. “Honey?” she essayed tenderly, from the floor. At this, the husband reached out and seemed to strangle invisible Antonias in the air all around him, his eyes beseeching Heaven. “What will it take to get rid of you?” he cried. “What do I have to do to make you stop doing this to me?” Oh, the poor little man, Antonia thought; I’ve nearly killed him. “Just give me half the money,” she said, putting her hands on her throat. “Just—*haugh, guagg, hack, kkgh!* That’s all! Just *aaaghkk* the money, honey!” She laughed and coughed, and the husband ran from the room ashen-faced, as if he’d seen a fulminating witch, a dead woman speaking, some kind of horror-flick apparition. In later years Antonia never, in her stocking-footed friends’ hearing, spoke of him with anger, always only pity, because, she said, he knew himself so poorly. And her friends, listening to her tell these stories in a voice that grew more cartoonishly little-girlish with each year she spent on Central Park West, felt sorry for the husband, too.

2

TWO'S COMPANY

AND THEN THE PERFECT COUPLE, Pam and Paul, who first hooked up in college, co-writing operettas and co-founding a cabaret, went on to amaze their classmates by marrying in Reno six months before they even graduated, and finally, at a combined age of forty-three, set up shop in California as a comedy-writing duo. They were still only twenty-seven when NBC picked up their pilot for a series about suburban teen-agers with funny yesteryear hair styles and funny yesteryear teen difficulties. Every Wednesday night, for the next five seasons, tens of millions of smiling Americans watched the heart icon in the show's closing credit ("A PAMELA BURGER ♥ PAUL MATHER CREATION") twinkle once to the sound of a little chime. In joint appearances at their alma mater's Career Day—Pam resembling a freckly Bartlett pear, Paul a cartoon scallion with well-gelled rootlets—the two of them dispensed encouragement to aspiring young writers. "Work hard, don't compromise, never settle for the easy deal," Pam said. "Failing that," Paul said, "at least make sure the easy deal is for eight figures." The happy couple, whose three Emmies had the effect of confirming the literary rightness of their relationship, retired from the show in 1998, sold their bungalow in Santa Monica, and bought a thirty-acre spread up in the mountains, because, as they quipped in joint interviews with their old home-town papers in North Carolina and Massachusetts, Paul had become psychologically incapable of remembering whether the "O" in "Michael Ovitz" was long or short and therefore couldn't appear in public anymore.

At their mountain hideaway, to which, for a pleasant few weeks, magazines sent reporters to profile them and transcribe Paul's one-liners, they were attempting to write an original romantic comedy. ("We want to push each other creatively," Pam told *Good Housekeeping*. "Pam, for example," Paul said, "has taken to pushing me creatively down the stairs.") Despite several months of pushing, however, they remained nowhere with the script until, one Monday morning, the FedEx truck arrived with a copy of their latest profile in *L.A. Weekly*. Pam saw the headline of the article, "TWO'S COMPANY," and was thunderstruck. "Two's Company": perfect title!

"The thing we know *best* is the romance of marriage," she declared. "The world doesn't need another gag about a girl with come in her hair. The world doesn't need another drama about adultery. What would be truly original, at this cultural moment, would be a straight-up celebration of monogamy. To create a couple who are so funny together, so right for each other, that you're rooting for the marriage from the very first frame."

Paul, who was frowning unhappily at the photograph that accompanied the profile, said that he agreed with her—mostly. His only tiny worry was that a too perfect couple might come across as more cutesy than ha-ha funny. As possibly even outright irritating. He also wondered what to make of the fact that the funniest married movie couple he could think of offhand, Nick and Nora Charles, were hopeless drunks. "Just, you know, wondering," he said.

Pam said she didn't see why Paul was being so pissy. To prove him wrong, she went to her study, which was a den of deep-pile silk rugs and pillows the size of armchairs, to create some scenes of a marriage that was both perfect and hilarious. Paul's own office contained a four-drawer file cabinet and a folding chair. He went out to the pool and dutifully opened a notebook for one of the three pilots that he and Pam were contractually obligated to develop. In this one, called "Playing House," two great-looking high-school seniors get married after their parents, who are friends, are killed together in a helicopter crash, and the newlyweds have to learn how to behave like grownups with big mansions and millions of dollars and how to cope with being C.E.O.s of the family businesses even though they're still just eighteen and applying to colleges. Paul, for whom first drafts tended to be a torment, had uncharacteristically looked forward to writing the scene in which the two kids lie in bed in their middle-aged pajamas and lament the shrivelment of their sex drive; but now he didn't see the humor in it. He felt compelled, instead, to go and lock himself in the guesthouse bathroom with a head shot of the twenty-year-old actress, Tracy Gill, whom he was hoping to cast in the pilot's lead female role, and when he emerged from the guesthouse, nearly an hour later, his mood extremely sour, he went straight to his vintage yellow BMW roadster and gunned its extravagantly polluting engine and steered it toward the city.

Paul's childhood had been the stuff of comedy. His father was

ordained as a Presbyterian minister but left the Church to work in human resources at Raytheon and devote his leisure time to sports betting and solitary drinking while Paul's mother found Jesus, moved to Colorado, and started a second family with an Air Force colonel whom Paul, as an adolescent, dreamed of murdering with a hatchet. At boarding school, he took to wearing all black and smoking black Sobranies, and he helped form a literary comedy troupe that played scenes like the tsar's near-execution of Dostoyevsky for slapstick. Paul's favorite role was a cheerful Jehovah's Witness who kept tapping on Sylvia Plath's kitchen door while she was trying to kill herself; he also liked to play Sartre's alter ego, Roquentin, and stare at a tree root until its disgusting raw existence made him barf.

When Pam discovered Paul, in their second week of college, he was a gaunt loner who was almost as disdainful of girls as he was of alcohol and sports. On his dinner tray, the night she plunked her own tray down beside it, were three dishes of jello cubes, one dish of vanilla pudding, two glasses of Pepsi, and one flagrant turkey cutlet. Pam's opening line was "Are you sure you should eat that cutlet?" By Thanksgiving, she was well on her way to having civilized him. She took him home to Durham and introduced him to her plump, jolly parents. Her father had co-written the standard college intro text in macroeconomics, and every time the family needed another million dollars he put out a new edition. ("This is my private mint," he snickered, showing Paul his home office.) The father gave him tutorials in wine appreciation, the mother taught him to say the family motto in Latin—"Someday we'll look back on this and it will all seem funny"—and every night, in Pam's bedroom, which the parents had winkingly forbidden Paul to enter after 10 P.M. ("There'll be hell to pay, young man, if you so much as lay a finger on our daughter!"), Pam unstopped the carnal energies that had long been building up in the steel-clad cooker of Paul's New England psyche. Prior to Paul, Pam herself had been naked only with a French exchange student, whose thick accent and single-minded pursuit of sex later became the basis for the amusing character of Pierre on her and Paul's hit TV series, but she was such a well-loved child that she was neither surprised nor frightened when the strange, intense Yankee she'd picked out for herself became obsessively devoted to her; she took it as her due.

Which was, perhaps, Paul felt, as he drove his roadster down the

101, both the excellent and comforting thing about Pam and the root of his problem now: her lack of doubt. The funniest lines in their work, the lines with that satisfying crackle of sadism, were mostly his, but he was aware that it was Pam's confidence and Pam's higher tolerance for cliché that had won them their big contracts. And now, because she wasn't engineered for doubt, Pam seemed to think it didn't matter that she'd gained fifteen pounds since moving to the mountains and that she was thumping around the house with the adipose aquiver in her freckled upper arms; she certainly seemed not to care that they hadn't had sex since before Labor Day; and she'd been pointedly deaf to certain urgent personal-grooming and postural hints that Paul had dropped during their photo shoot for *L.A. Weekly*. Indeed, the person he now imagined murdering with a hatchet was that paper's photo editor, who, Paul was certain, had deliberately selected a shot in which Pam looked like Jackie Gleason, in order to punish her for her complacency and to ridicule Paul for his too sincere avowal, in a paragraph not three inches from Pam's splotchy face, that everything good in his life he owed to her.

He felt trapped and isolated by the freakish particulars of a romance that Pam, even now, was endeavoring to celebrate in a film script. He wished that he could call up some other woman, but it seemed to him unlikely that there was a single attractive female in all of Southern California who had not been nauseated by his and Pam's repeated public declarations of their delight in each other. And so, arriving at the little office of Mathburger Productions, he simply took what he had driven down for—an old, lovingly preserved folder of his high-school scripts, and a Tracy Gill career-compilation video that his assistant had put together and that Paul was hoping might include a few scenes that Gill now regretted having shot.

Pam, meanwhile, was laughing out loud while writing her pages. These pages concerned a slightly neurotic but charming couple, Sam and Paula, who arrive in Maui for a week's vacation. Paula, whom Pam described as "extremely attractive in a thinking man's way," has managed to convince herself, despite turning the heads of the resort's buff male staffers, that she is old and dowdy and losing her appeal, and a deftly handled series of comic misunderstandings quickly persuades her that Sam is flirting with a brainless bombshell, Kimbo, whom, in reality, he couldn't care less about.

“Uh, and why couldn’t he?” Paul said when Pam, after a month of hard work, finally showed him Act I.

“Because she’s a big-titted dolt,” Pam answered. “You know, the kind of person you’d expect a guy to be drooling over, which is what makes Paula so paranoid, which is what makes Sam feel like he’s so busted, when in fact—”

“In fact what?”

“In fact, he’s *embarrassed* by how uninterested he is in Kimbo. You know, like, what’s wrong with him? All the other guys in Maui are drooling over this girl. And Sam is like, Am I gay? Am I less of a man for being monogamous? Because the idea here is that it’s hard, it’s *comically awkward*, to still be so in love with his wife after all these years, while there’s this huge cultural pressure for him to be hitting on little chicklets like Kimbo.”

After a pause, Paul nodded. “Yeah,” he said. “Yeah, O.K. I get it. That’s interesting. But what if, then, in Act II—”

“No,” Pam said in a voice that made Paul wonder if she were quite as oblivious as he’d thought. “I’ve been thinking about this sixteen hours a day,” she said, “and no. That’s the totally obvious beat: she suspects him, her suspicion gives him ideas, he tries to act on these ideas, compromising positions, crisis in marriage, love reaffirmed, lesson learned, happy ending.”

“No, I agree, that’s stale,” Paul said. “It’s just, why does Kimbo (unfunny name, by the way) have to be so cartoonish? Why can’t she be like Paula, only younger? Kind of a thinking man’s beautiful twenty-year-old?”

“Well,” Pam said, “because that wouldn’t be funny. Apart from that one little problem, its total lack of funniness, it’s a great idea.”

Paul retreated to his own study to view the regrettably quite PG-rated Tracy Gill video for the fourth or fifth time and to reread his high-school scripts and imagine them as the basis for a “Monty Python” cum “Fractured Fairy Tales” type of cable comedy hit. It was the surprisingly durable brilliance of these scripts that gave him the courage finally, after painful hesitation, to pick up his phone and call Gill’s agent to arrange a private pre-meeting meeting with the potential star of his and Pam’s potential new hit series.

The meeting took place at a Starbucks in Westwood at two on a Tuesday afternoon. Paul’s only serious complaint with the lovely Gill, in person, was that she had brought along her mother.

Mrs. Gill reminded Paul of his own mother. Her first question was

“What exactly does the phrase ‘pre-meeting meeting’ mean?” Her second question was “Where’s your wife?” Her third question was “Why aren’t we meeting at your office?” Her fourth question was “Why did you not want Tracy’s agent here?”

Paul’s answers to these questions were syntactically complex. To change the subject, he went ahead and pitched his idea for a cable show based on his high-school scripts. Tracy Gill averred, with a squeal, that she’d just read “The Bell Jar.” Mrs. Gill asked Paul what he thought was funny about a young mother putting her head inside an oven.

The meeting was over in thirty-five minutes. Back up in the mountains, after a high-speed drive that Paul spent picturing a hatchet buried in Mrs. Gill’s forehead, he found his overweight wife by the pool. He was breathless with wrongdoing. His wife asked him to guess who had just telephoned her, but Paul couldn’t. “Tracy Gill’s mother,” Pam said.

Paul stopped breathing altogether. “You and Tracy Gill’s mother have been talking on the phone?”

By way of reply, Pam gathered her robe around her and stood up. “Paul,” she said, “I want you to move out. Right away.”

Her words were so unexpected, and they made Paul feel so guilty and fearful, that even though he was basically sick to death of Pam he tried to defend himself and argue for their marriage: “You’re splitting up with me because I had coffee with Tracy Gill and her mother?”

Pam shook her head. “It’s just that, before I go any further with the script,” she said, “I want you at a different address.”

Paul said, “Are you out of your mind? You think I’d actually try to steal credit?”

“At this point, Paul, I’d consider you capable of almost anything.”

“Even, my God, the crime of drinking coffee at two in the afternoon!”

“You had your chance to sign on with this project,” Pam said. “I gave you weeks and weeks and weeks.”

“This project,” Paul cried, “is a fraudulent, wishful middle-aged woman’s fantasy!”

To which Pam simply shook her head and said, “You are such a disappointment to me.”

A month later, as part of their separation agreement, Paul signed an affidavit in which he renounced all claims to “Two’s Company.”

Pam's publicist confided to *Variety*, "He's a really nice guy, but she's been carrying him for years. It finally just got to be too much." After "Two's Company" grossed a hundred and ten million in theatres, and Pam was photographed looking twenty pounds thinner than Paul had ever seen her, even in college, and she hooked up with a boy so chiselled and pectoral that even if he wasn't gay he should have been, and she went on to produce more comedies for an older female audience, each more profitable than the last, Paul came to see that what had looked to him like a wishful fantasy had been a fantasy only because he personally had not believed in it: because it offended his taste. Back in Pamland, the wish was still congruent with reality; and every ticket for a film of hers, every video rental and every rave review on AM radio, was like another vote to ratify her reality at the expense of his. The whole country was against him, and so he moved to New York City, where, well-insulated financially, he worked on recasting his comic literary vignettes as little formalist short stories that he mailed out to journals. You could see him at a certain kind of party, standing near open windows, wearing black, smoking cigarettes, and hoping to talk about his favorite subject, which was the badness of his ex-wife's films.

3

HOW HE CAME TO BE NOWHERE

ROOM 471, THE FEDERAL BUILDING, Eighth Street, Philadelphia: a perfectly square room which for no obvious reason had an eye chart on the southern wall. A leak in the roof two floors up had spread damage across the ceiling and down two other walls—ricotta-like eruptions of plaster, arrested avalanches of softened latex paint. In one corner where the cracks were especially complex, the ceiling was actually sagging. The room gave the impression of a desperate beleaguerment, as if an immense weight of water, that enemy of paper documents and even more so of anything electrical, were bearing down from above. There was a yeasty, incontinent smell of damp plaster, and rustles of official business outside the door.

In the room: two white men. From the fingers and arm and thorax of one of them, Andy Aberant, half a dozen wires in elementary colors stretched down a cheap particle-board table to a partition behind which the other, Special Agent Barry Thewless, was adjusting levels. Aberant looked wired for a virtual-reality experience, but the signals were all outgoing—respiration rate, skin moisture and so forth. Thewless's pants pockets were tumescent with Kleenex, his knobby face a bright pink from his morning shave. Watching over the table was a video camera with the sleek body and long legs of a shore bird.

"You're smiling why," Thewless said to Aberant.

Aberant, who had indeed begun to smile, said, "I was remembering the one time I ever had the courage to ask my father why he didn't fight in the Second World War. He was the right age for it, and I always had the feeling he felt like less of a man for not having fought with everybody else. That all his life he didn't feel like he really fit in. So I asked him once, and he said high blood pressure. He said he was late for his physical and he ran up six flights of stairs to the doctor's office. They took his blood pressure and they said he was unfit."

"This is amusing why," Thewless said.

"Because it just occurred to me that maybe he was lying. He was a bulldog, healthwise. He took like three sick days in his entire career. He was also uncontrollably honest. When he was dating my

mother he told her she wasn't half as pretty as her sister, stuff like that. He couldn't control it."

Thewless inclined his head to read his watch. "The point being what."

"The point being that he didn't tell the doctor that he'd run up those stairs. He didn't ask to be re-tested. So either what he told me wasn't true, or he wasn't completely honest with the doctor. You have to understand, this was a man who never lied. I didn't put it together until this minute."

Outside the only window, which was closed, the Philadelphia sky hovered proximately. The Ben Franklin Bridge, looking too big for its setting, came to an awkward end among warehouse roofs. On the broad sidewalk below the window, a handful of Catholic pacifists held aloft placards urging an end to the death penalty. There was light residual morning traffic on Eighth Street, the less serious commuters.

"I thought of it because of the blood-pressure thingy here and of course the whole topic of lies," Aberant said.

"The plethysmograph," Thewless said affectionately. "I'm going to pump that up again, if you don't mind, and then we'll do the questions a little differently." He reached over the partition, gave the rubber bulb a few amorous squeezes and returned to his instruments. "Your full name as it appears on your passport is what."

"Andrew Kearns Aberant. Stress on the first syllable of the last name."

"Your father and mother are alive, yes or no."

"No."

"You have three older sisters, excellent though substantially overweight Christian women with many children, all of whom reside in Texas, yes or no."

"Yes."

Thewless belonged to the Neutral Phrasing school of polygraph operators, and he read the questions on his clipboard in an unstressed monotone, as though dictating to voice-recognition software. To speak to a machine, one made oneself machine-like. And this, of course, was the point of the poly: that Aberant was a machine, that the organic wiring that instructed his arteries to constrict and his sweat glands to open partook of the same *materia prima* in which his "higher"-order thoughts held court. There were

rumors even now, gnostic whisperings on Wall Street, of new technologies that could patch into this wiring directly and decode, if not thoughts and images, certainly intentions and emotions. The old government-issue poly in Room 471 was Eisenhowerishly sincere and primitive, however, and quite out of its league when it came to reporting on the inside of Aberant.

"You are or have in the past been an anarchist or a member of or affiliated with any Communist or other totalitarian party including any subdivision or affiliate, yes or no," Thewless said.

"No."

"You're mentally ill or homosexual, yes or no."

"No."

"You're currently sleeping with who."

"I think you mean whom. Julia Fuller, in Manhattan. I see her on weekends."

"Who else?" Thewless said, somewhat less robotically.

"The whom here again would be nobody."

"Prior to your hiring by the Securities & Exchange Commission your position was what."

"I was a full-time law student at Columbia University."

"Prior to that you resided where."

"Bozeman, Montana."

"Your means of support was what."

"I had a small inheritance from my parents' death."

"The cause of their death was what."

"There was a freak windstorm in Lawrence, Kansas. They were blown off an overpass."

"At the time of their death you were employed as what."

"I was a staffer with the Environmental Defense League."

"At that time you engaged in activities that were in opposition to the United States government or you knowingly associated with individuals engaged in subversive activities, yes or no."

"No."

"You're aware that Environmental Defense League literature calls for the establishment of a New Holistic World Order, yes or no."

"To the best of my knowledge the EDL is a law-abiding group and always has been."

"Yes or no."

"No, actually."

Thewless had no more questions. He released the pressure in the

cuff on Aberant's arm and gingerly untaped the other sensors.

Aberant put on his shirt and jacket with the compact, dignified movements of a man whose honesty had been vigorously impugned.

In front of the Federal Building, under the Eakins-like vacancy of the sky, a broad-shouldered, big-chested woman in a thigh-length red T-shirt detached herself from the other Catholic protesters and intercepted Aberant in the no-parking zone where he'd left his car. "Hey you," she said. "What are you doing here?"

"Taking a lie-detector test."

"No shit. How many times did you lie?"

"Six."

"So kiss me six times," she said.

With a laugh he removed the parking ticket that was lodged beneath his wiper blade, tore it in two and dropped it in the gutter.

Although he'd been lying for as long as he could remember, had incorporated deception so thoroughly into his being that it almost seemed as if his entire life had been a preparation for passing with flying colors the final random polygraph test that stood between him and full federal security clearance, Andy Aberant had seldom been pathological about it. He was simply a skilled withholder of pertinent information, a sower of red herrings; an extrapolator, an interpolator. Having visited North Carolina as a child, he saw no harm in claiming, as an adult, that he'd also been to South Carolina. After all, he had no memory of either state.

When he was young there was a mania for science fairs, and for various disreputable reasons he keenly wished to win a regional science fair trophy; the main reason, perhaps, was that his aptitude for science was substantially nil. He went to the university library and combed its holdings in plant physiology, which his class at school was studying, and he found a technical paper on plant growth substances that was both obscure enough and simple enough to be mistaken for the work of a brilliant eighth-grader. It concerned GIBBERELIC ACID and some mysterious elusive chemical factor named K2, also the name of a mountain. The junior-high biology lab happened to own several grams of GIBBERELIC ACID and using some plywood and white paint Andy built a controlled environment in which to grow oat seedlings in test tubes. Once it was all painted and electrified and turning green with young oats,

he photographed it with an Instamatic from many angles. Then he ignored it for so long that his mother began to complain about the smell. (At the Aberants' church great stress was placed on Christ's painful crucifixion, but in Andy's own private version of His passion, Christ had been allowed to die of neglect in a terrarium, flowerpot or fishbowl.) To determine the effects of GIBBERELIC ACID in concert with mysterious, elusive, chemical factor K2, he was now supposed to weigh the oat seedlings, but at this late date they were little more than crusts of dried-out blackish slime. It took him several long afternoons to draw the graph showing the experiment's "correct" results and then work backwards, fabricating a long list of seedling weights with some artful random variation, and then work forward again to make sure the fictional data produced the correct results, which they did, and he won the three-foot-tall first-place trophy and special commendation from the judges for his photographs.

Afterwards his father took him aside and told him he should smile and thank people who had praised his work; that his self-deprecation looked to them like arrogance, and he hoped that Andy wasn't arrogant about his victory?

Andy said no, he wasn't arrogant about his victory.

So to a house with a fish symbol or a Galilean crowd scene in every room there came a hollow pagan icon—a silver-plated Winged Victory on a faux-walnut base with Andy's name engraved on it incorrectly ("ABERANT"): SCIENCE VICTORIOUS, presumably, over the forces of darkness and superstition. Whenever he noticed the trophy gathering dust in the family room, what he experienced was not so much guilt (though there was some of that too) as a curious sensation of seeing an artifact from the life of the boy he was supposed to be, the authentic Andrew that he emphatically was not. From here it was a short step to oiling the hinges of the front door and nailing down the loose floorboards of the hallway so that he could silently slip from the house after everyone (including him, with much yawning and stretching of arms) had gone to bed. While the putative Andrew slept, the inconveniently actual Andy drank apple wine with other junior-varsity golfers at the bottom of a gravel pit. And the next morning, so badly hungover that after chewing a bite of toast for a minute or two he determined that swallowing it was not remotely an option, his transgressions were rewarded with special concern from his mother. She put him to bed

and brought him liquids and then hurried off to church, because the funny thing about Andy's bouts with stomach flu was that they always seemed to come on Sunday mornings.

The problem was not that he was spoiled, or even, in a household as evangelically correct as the Aberants', particularly over-indulged. The problem was love. The last foamy wave of it, sweet and red as Strawberry Crush, would still be clearing through his gunwales when a fresh wave hit. As the youngest child, the long-wished-for son and little brother, he was inundated, capsized, sunk. There were possibly as few as eight candles on the birthday cake in front of him the first time he found himself, in the glow of their flames and of the expectant smiles that ringed him, feigning pleasure. To the aunts and grandmothers who had remembered his special day he wrote *I love the present and will think of you whenever I use it*, but the truth was that he thought about himself a great deal and about his aunts and grandmothers (who loved him) almost never. He was the best student in his family but he felt stupider than his sisters and parents, who at any given moment had room in their heads for the contemplation of people less fortunate than themselves and for thanking the Lord and for excitement about proms and new curtains for the living room; they were capable of astounding feats of parallel processing, and the only way he could keep up with them, the only way to avoid betraying his unworthiness of their love, was to perfect the art of seeming. He felt like the lone oxygen-breather in a house whose atmosphere of helium made everyone else's voices high-pitched with festivity and optimism. The only place where he could breathe was a private place inside himself, and fortunately his family loved him so much that they didn't notice he was missing.

His father, Gene Aberant, was a home-improvement maven, a traveling agronomist for the state of Kansas and perhaps the most tender-hearted man in the Sunflower State. Wiry and balding, with thick-lensed glasses and big teeth that were forever exposed in his happiness to be alive, he weighed not a whole lot more than half of what his wife did. He loved and was loved by every small child he ever met, which would have included Andy had Andy not been a sour middle-aged French philosopher (this was approximately how alien he looked to himself in hindsight) trapped in the body of a child. For Andy's thirteenth birthday, after his victory at the science fair, Gene unilaterally built him a full-service laboratory bench in the basement, and for many months afterward Andy was so stricken

with guilt over the misunderstanding that he spent all the money he earned as a caddie to amass supplies for the lab. He was devoid of scientific curiosity but he genuinely liked the supplies as sensual objects: fresh packages of microscope slides, slabs of paraffin for the microtome that he never figured out how to use, retorts and ring stands and Erlenmeyer flasks, rubber tubes and rubber stoppers, anything related to the deliciously austere word “reagent”, a secondhand microscope with a *rack-and-pinion* focusing mechanism and *knurled* brass knobs; killing jars, agar-agar, vermiculite. He bought a hardbound ledger in which to record his observations, but it remained empty. His concern was simply to appear scientific, and his lab activities were strictly demonstrations—“experiments” that produced smoke or flame or attractive arrangements of glassware or colorful liquids or death to insects.

“We’ve got a budding young scientist,” Gene announced from time to time.

Only after Gene was dead did Andy become cynical enough himself to suspect the utter absence of cynicism in that household, and to see how he in his young cynicism might have been the most innocent of all of them, because he’d bothered to be a liar, had bothered to try to preserve his family’s innocence, had actually *wanted* that stupid trophy and, worst of all, had believed himself to be uniquely deceitful—as if, when the rest of humanity said *I love the present and will think of you whenever I use it*, they actually meant it. He recognized, too late, that innocence is always willful. After all he must have reeked of Boone’s Farm Apple Wine when he was put back to bed on Sunday mornings, and he was often caught in his lies, and his ever-more outrageous second-order lies were swallowed with peculiar readiness. *Why had his mother heard him opening the front door at five in the morning?* He said he’d been stargazing. *How had he used half a tank of gas driving twelve blocks to the university library?* He said he’d heard on the car radio about an interesting partial solar eclipse south of Wichita. *Could that possibly have been Andy whom Mrs. Sternhagen had spotted with Alicia Rutting on the eleventh green of the Lakeview Country Club three hours after he’d gone to his bedroom with much yawning and stretching of arms?* He took the opportunity to ask his parents for a birthday gift subscription to *Sky & Telescope*.

If his parents had survived to old age, had lived even just a year or two longer, there would surely have been a correction. Andy

would have gotten around to admitting that his postgraduate apartment on West 122nd Street was not “a few blocks” from Wall Street, that the Environmental Defense League had not been founded by Marlin Perkins, that the woman who sometimes answered his telephone was not his roommate’s sister but the girlfriend with whom he was “cohabiting” (a word which to evangelical Kansans connoted *lewdly fucking*), and that he had majored in astronomy at college because the old gin-smelling chairman of the department would not fail any student who came to his weekly rooftop star parties. Or maybe the correction would have run the other way. Maybe one of Andy’s sisters would have found a new God and blown the roof off the house of Aberant, announced to the world that shy, “honest” Gene had sexually abused each of his three daughters in turn, and that their mother had worn those hideous floral pants suits not because she had bad taste, but because her legs were covered with bruises and burn marks, and that all the piety and cheer, the baking for bake sales and the cherishing of Andy and his pleasures, had in fact been an elaborate quintipartite conspiracy whose aim was the achievement of innocence on Andy’s part, because they needed one innocent in their family or they all would have gone crazy. They needed him to believe that he was deceiving them lest he suspect the enormity of their deception of him, because the ravages of Boone’s Farm, the moist comforts of Alicia Rutting, the Saturday-afternoon pilgrimage to the Foxxxy Club Cinema in Kansas City, the exhalation of cannabis smoke into the fiberglass insulation between attic rafters in the heart-rendingly naive belief that no one downstairs could smell it (for Andy had done this too), were all just lilacs and bunny rabbits compared to the sick truths that they were conspiring to keep from him . . .

But there was no correction of any kind. In the year of Big Brother, which was also the year when high-speed monorails rendered the automobile obsolete, which was also the year when Malthusian famines swept the overpopulated planet, his parents took a walk together on a Sunday afternoon, and a wind out of nowhere lifted them off the Harrison Avenue overpass and dropped them on the pavement forty feet below. When Andy flew into Kansas City the next morning, FREAK WIND and KILLER GUST were the lead stories in the two local papers. Apparently the gust, some weird sort of back-door frontal disturbance, had descended full

force into a day of perfect calm, like an invisible twister that was everywhere at once, shearing off awnings, denuding billboards and upending mobile homes. According to news reports, a lot of people had believed the wind was the end of the world; it had hit with the uncanny suddenness of a shock wave from a pre-emptive strike on the silos twenty miles west.

During the week he spent at home, it seemed as if everywhere he turned he saw an exact replica of his old science-fair trophy—the identical Winged Victory and fake walnut pedestal. Behind the cash register of the gas station where he filled the tank of the parental Olds: “Manhattan Kansas Stalk Car Derby, Second Runner Up.” In the richly panelled employee lounge-cum-casket showroom where he shook the soft, pickled-seeming hand of funeral director Ollie Engdahl: “First Prize, Kiwanis Bowl-A-Thon, Engdahl Funereal Home Employees.” And in the den of the pastor who led him and his sisters and brothers-in-law in a lengthy private prayer: “Pilsbury Regional Bake-Off, Daisy Fawcett, Lemin Bars.” The big windows of the Fawcetts’ modern split-level were so clean that they lent a painful definition to the late-winter wheatfields and woodlots outside them, the stubble and oak branches blown clean by a sky so starkly blue that there seemed not to be a sun in it anywhere, nor any birds or other life. While the rest of his surviving family went to the Fawcett kitchen and loaded plates with Mrs. Fawcett’s famous lemon bars, Andy did a thing he later lost sleep regretting. He stole a black Sharpie from the pastor’s desk and defaced the trophy’s inscription, changing the “i” in “Lemin” to an “o”. He knew this was a cruel thing to do because he knew that Mrs. Fawcett was in midwestern awe of authority and so almost certainly preferred a professional error to an amateur truth.

In later years when people asked him how his parents had died, he generally said “a highway accident”—which was hardly even a lie—because the true cause of their death seemed ridiculous to anyone who didn’t come from Kansas. In Kansas people took the weather seriously; almost everyone had seen a funnel cloud or had slid off a road in a blizzard or knew somebody who’d known somebody incinerated by lightning, usually a golfer. But the sad truth was that even Andy found his parents’ deaths ridiculous, and he hoped that they too had been so shocked and amused to find

themselves tumbling off that overpass that they hadn't had time for terror before the impact shattered their skulls and a lot of their bones. When he viewed them in their caskets he saw that Ollie Engdahl had been unequal to the task of adjusting their skeletons into restful poses. The bodies lay lumpily in the white satin cushions like battered dolls—crude replicas of two late-middle-aged Kansans who, as far as Andy knew, had done nothing worse in their lives than maybe love him a little too much. He was particularly unimpressed by the smaller doll's pretense of being his father, whom he could not imagine otherwise than as a tiger of lean power. As, for example, when Gene had rushed to get the family's new sprinkler system installed while a summer sky hatched thunderstorms, had sprinted back and forth across the front lawn with undulating lengths of plastic pipe while the sky turned the green and black of spoiled beef and the thunder came from every direction, the muscles in the globes of his shoulders braiding and unbraiding as he tried to shovel all the Kansas clay back in the trenches before the deluge struck, an actual freshet of sweat, not just isolated droplets, coursing from his face. The sky opened before he'd refilled his orderly trenches, and where a different man, a man who had fought in the war, might have shouted curses at the weather, Gene simply grinned and shook his head as a bolt of lightning blew out a nearby utility-pole transformer in a malign experiment of ozone and evil-smelling PCBs, and what basically qualified as a flash flood ripped through the trenches and carried a good part of the Aberant family's topsoil, along with various not-inexpensive pipes and sprinkler-system fittings, down the hill and into the culvert where Andy, then about eight years old, had recently impressed two neighbor girls by cavorting naked. Standing by the caskets sixteen years later, he wept but unfortunately also watched himself weep.

In later years he said "a highway accident" because he had learned that it was just too wearisome to persuade people of the truth when an easily swallowable half-truth was available. And the weariness became a way of life. He drifted for a decade in a slow curve that eventually landed him in law school, that modern refuge of the aimlessly clever, and from law school he edged by default into public service. The feeling of stupidity from his childhood stayed with him always. He considered himself a person to whom nothing interesting had ever happened. If someone had asked his

father if he'd ever been to South Carolina, his father would have said, "No, but I hear it's a beautiful state," and then would have listened, beaming and nodding, while the person told him interesting facts and legends of South Carolina, and after ten minutes Gene would have learned a great deal about the state, and the person would have enjoyed talking to him.

Andy, his only son, somehow came into the world needing people to believe that he knew everything, which was another way of saying that he believed he knew nothing about anything but himself; and what he knew about himself, which was that he was very afraid, he dedicated all his energies to concealing. When he told stories, they were usually stories about someone else. In these stories he felt more truly alive than he did in the few he ever told about himself. He had the nagging suspicion that if it had been someone other than himself in the vicinity of whose shattered ulna an orthopedic surgeon had left the cap of a twenty-five-cent Bic pen, someone other than himself who had unwittingly locked himself in an aft lavatory of an L-1011 and spent six hours in a USAir hangar before being rescued by a cleaning-crew member (these were the two most colorful things that had ever happened to him), he might have told the stories with relish. But since it was he to whom these things had happened, he quickly lost interest in them, because they were simply colorful and there were only two of them, and two seemed approximately his allotment as a citizen of a well-ordered republic in which mildly zany or tragic things once in a while befell almost everyone—the freak gust of wind, the massacre at a Wendy's, the six-legged calf, the red bell pepper which when photographed from the proper angle uncannily resembled the head of Richard Nixon. Why bother mentioning one's own few contributions to the general static? There was no truth whatsoever to his stories. They did not begin, "I met the woman of my life at" or "I found God when" or "I decided to join the Revolution because." He seemed to himself an anti-raconteur. The only thing about himself that felt singular was the degree to which he experienced the shallowness of his personality and the emptiness of words. He had the breadth and depth of knowledge of a card catalog. He was full of data which often proved not very reliable. He was good at taking tests, at causing women to fall in love with him and at escaping from these women with his reputation for kindness intact. Only once had he failed to escape in time; he was

living in Bozeman with a girl who was seriously Catholic, and her last words to him were: "Your soul is dead."

Had his father deceived the army doctor? He would never know. Had his father deceived *him*? He would never know. By missing the war and then living in a house of women, Gene Aberant had become estranged from the world of men. Andy had simply completed the development and become estranged from the world of everyone. The only rules he believed in were rules of grammar, spelling and punctuation. And now he really did love the present. It was the only place he could bear to live.